

Did Aristotle Accept Psychological Egoism?

Introduction

Did Aristotle accept psychological egoism? The traditional interpretation is that he did.¹ The case for this interpretation can be stated simply. Aristotle holds it as an explanatory starting point (ἀρχή) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that human beings act ultimately for the sake of their own happiness (εὐδαιμονία). This principle serves as an explanatory starting point for human action insofar as it specifies each person's own happiness as its ultimate "final cause" (see *Metaphysics* 1013a32-5). But since happiness is the "best good" that a person can possess (1095a14-20, 1097b22-4), this principle amounts to a form of psychological egoism (Terence Irwin, *From Socrates to the Reformation*, 125, bottom paragraph).

To be sure, Aristotle's explanatory starting point is controversial. It implies that self-sacrificial or self-disregarding action is impossible for a human being. For the only meaningful way in which our action could be self-sacrificial or self-disregarding is if we, in the first case, knowingly give up what is best for ourselves for the sake of something else or, in the second case, fail to aim at what is best for ourselves when we act. But Aristotle's starting point forbids both of these things.

At least in part because of the controversial character of what the traditional interpretation claims is Aristotle's explanatory starting point, this interpretation has come under

¹ For example, H. A. Prichard argues that the ultimate end of our action is our own happiness and, since he understands happiness in terms of pleasure, attributes "psychological hedonism" to Aristotle ("The Meaning of *Agathon* in the *Ethics* of Aristotle," 258-60); G. C. Field argues that the final good at which we all aim, i.e. happiness, is a condition of ourselves and therefore "selfish" (*Moral Theory*, 71-3, 110-11); David Ross states "For the most part Aristotle's moral system is decidedly self-centered. It is at his own εὐδαιμονία, we are told, that man aims and should aim." (*Aristotle*, 230); D. J. Allan states that "Self-interest, more or less enlightened, is assumed to be the motive of all conduct and choice" (*The Philosophy of Aristotle*, 150).

attack.² Some contemporary scholars have denied that he thinks we act ultimately for the sake of our own happiness. They therefore deny that he accepts psychological egoism. I will address this controversy. I begin by marshalling evidence for the traditional interpretation; I then consider two prominent challenges that have been brought against it—one from Aristotle’s account of friendship, the other from his account of virtuous action; finally, I conclude that, these challenges notwithstanding, the traditional interpretation should be upheld.

Part I: Evidence for the Traditional Interpretation

Our own happiness is the “simply final” end

In Book I, Aristotle lays it down as an explanatory starting point that human beings do everything for the sake of happiness. He says, “It is reasonable that happiness is this way [sc. prized and final] also on account of its being an explanatory starting point (ἀρχή), for *we all do all of the remaining things* (τὰ λοιπὰ πάντα πάντες πράττομεν) for its sake.” (1102a2-3, my emphasis).³ Happiness is therefore the ultimate goal of our action. But whose happiness? It is reasonable to understand “each person’s own.”⁴ This is the most natural way to read Aristotle’s claim, and he says nothing in this section to prevent or correct this reading. As we shall see, he even gives us a positive indication that each person’s own happiness is what he specifically has in mind.

² Consider Julia Annas, “Self-Love in Aristotle,” 9-13, and note that she labels Aristotle’s apparent claim that altruistic actions are actually self-interested, “worrying,” “problematic,” and “objectionable;” Jennifer Whiting, “The Nicomachean Account of *Philia*,” 302, and note that she claims her non-egoistic interpretation of Aristotle “rescues the ethical credentials of his eudaimonism.”

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Greek are my own.

⁴ This is also the reading of David Bostock (*Aristotle’s Ethics*, 26, bottom paragraph, 237, second paragraph), Michael Pakaluk (*Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction*, 12, top), Irwin (*Reformation*, 125), and Thomas Hurka (“Aristotle on Virtue: Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong” 14, bottom paragraph).

However, before I turn to this indication, I must note that the reading I have just given of the above passage—that we do everything else for the sake of happiness—is not without controversy. Sarah Broadie denies that this passage describes actual human action. She says, “this is not an observation about human motivation, but a normative declaration that everything else *should* be subordinated to happiness” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 291, my emphasis). However, she is clearly reading the text against the grain. Aristotle does not say δεῖ (“should”). He makes a clear statement about the end—“happiness”—that human beings actually act for.

Timothy Roche, on the other hand, grants that the above passage describes actual human action, but contends that by “all of the remaining things,” Aristotle does not mean “all other actions,” but only “virtuous actions” (“In Defense of An Alternative View of the Foundation of Aristotle’s Moral Theory,” 82, note 61). But this strikes me as a doubtful reading of the text. He quotes 1102a3-4, “we take the starting-point (τὴν ἀρχὴν) and the cause of the good things (τῶν ἀγαθῶν) to be something precious (τίμιόν) and divine” (his translation), but this does not support his reading, unless he takes “good things” to mean “good (i.e., virtuous) deeds.” But this is pretty clearly not what τὰ ἀγαθὰ means here. It means “good things” not “good deeds.”

It is true that prior to Aristotle’s claim that we do “all of the remaining things” for the sake of happiness he discusses its relation to virtuous actions. His intention is to show that happiness should be classified as a good that is “prized” (τίμιόν) rather than “praised” (1102a2 with 1101b10-11). To make this case, he claims that happiness belongs among the “best things” in reference to which we praise things, such as virtue, but which are not themselves praised (1101b25-31). But the discussion of happiness as an explanatory starting point is not a continuation of this particular argument. It is not, for example, an argument that, since virtuous

actions are praised with a view to happiness, they are done for the sake of happiness. It rather constitutes a separate consideration for why happiness should be classified as a good that is “prized.” Thus, Aristotle says, “It is reasonable that happiness is this way (sc. prized and final) *also on account of* (καὶ διὰ) it being an explanatory starting point.” (my emphasis).

To return to the indication that when Aristotle says, “we all do all of the remaining things for the sake of happiness,” he specifically has in mind “each person’s own happiness,” he says earlier in Book I that of all ends, happiness “most of all seems” (μάλιστα δοκεῖ) to be “simply final” (ἀπλῶς τέλειον)—that is, always chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of anything else (1097a33-4). To then illustrate this point, he says that while we choose other ends such as virtue, pleasure, honor, and awareness (νοῦς) for their own sake, “we, supposing that we will be happy by means of these things, also choose them for the sake of happiness (αἰρούμεθα δὲ καὶ τῆς εὐδαιμονίας χάριν, διὰ τούτων ὑπολαμβάνοντες εὐδαιμονήσειν).” (1097b4-5, my emphasis). That is, he illustrates his claim that happiness most of all seems to be simply final by claiming that we ourselves choose other ends for the sake of ourselves being happy. This illustration thus suggests that each person’s own happiness is what Aristotle has in mind as a simply final end. But if each person’s own happiness is a simply final end, then it is presumably this happiness, and not anyone else’s, that we do “all of the remaining things” for the sake of.

Eustratius and Thomas Aquinas also seem to understand Aristotle’s claim that we choose other things in order that “we may be happy” as pointing to each person’s own happiness as the ultimate aim of their action (Eustratius, *In Ethica Nicomachea Commentaria*, 62, lines 6-15; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, paragraph 111). Dennis McKerlie, on the other hand, disagrees. He grants that Aristotle offers each person’s own

happiness as an example of a simply final end, but he denies that this suggests that the ultimate end of our action is always our own happiness. He argues, rather, that Aristotle is intentionally limiting his discussion to someone who happens to be aiming at his own happiness as his “ultimate goal” and therefore does not mean to preclude that we sometimes take the happiness of another person as a “fundamental end” (=“ultimate goal”?, “Friendship, Self-Love, and Concern for Others in Aristotle’s Ethics,” 87). There are two ways to understand McKerlie’s position; (i) we sometimes have at least two “ultimate goals,” viz., the happiness of ourselves as well as the happiness of others; (ii) sometimes our ultimate goal is our own happiness; other times, it is the happiness of others. However, either way, his interpretation encounters difficulties.

Concerning (i), if we pursue two “ultimate goals,” the happiness of ourselves and the happiness of others, then we will, at least in some circumstances, also pursue both of them together. That is, if we pursue a and we pursue b, then we will, at least in some circumstances, also pursue a+b (a+b thus reveals itself as our true “ultimate goal;” compare 1097a22-4). But then, we will choose a for the sake of a+b. That is, we will pursue our own happiness, for the sake of achieving both our own happiness and the happiness of others. But something is a “simply final end” only if it is chosen for its own sake and *never* for the sake of anything else. Therefore, on this interpretation, our own happiness fails to be an example of a simply final end. But Aristotle claims (and McKerlie grants) that our own happiness is an example of a simply final end. Maybe McKerlie would object here that Aristotle only intends that “we do not choose *eudaimonia* for ourselves for the sake of some other good for ourselves.” (“Friendship,” 87, note 4). But this is not what Aristotle says. He (a) offers our own happiness is an example of a simply final end; and (b) claims that something is a simply final end only if it is chosen for its own sake

and never for the sake of anything else. In other words, this response weakens Aristotle's claim to "never chosen for the sake of *any other personal good*."

Concerning (ii), as Mckerlie points out, one person's happiness can affect the happiness of another (ibid.). It is therefore possible that, another person's happiness being our ultimate goal, we pursue our own happiness for the sake of that goal. But then, our own happiness will not be a simply final end, since we will in some circumstances pursue it for the sake of another's happiness.

In sum, if we accept that Aristotle offers each person's own happiness as an example of a simply final end, then we should take our own happiness to be that happiness for the sake of which we do "all of the remaining things."

However, someone could deny that Aristotle intends to offer each person's own happiness as an example of a simply final end. I have read the phrase "supposing that we will be happy by means of these things" individually instead of collectively; that is, I have read it to mean "[each of us] supposing that [he himself] will be happy by means of these things." But someone could always claim that Aristotle means this claim collectively—"[we] supposing that [all of us together] will be happy by means of these things."⁵ This reading suggests that Aristotle's intends to point to the collective happiness of all, rather than our own individual happiness, as a simply final end. And if the collective happiness of all is a simply final end, then it would not be true that our own happiness is (always) the ultimate goal of our action.

However, there are difficulties with the collective reading. In addition to striking me as unnatural in itself, it will force us to read other claims Aristotle makes in this section in an unnatural way. This difficulty stems from the fact that only the virtuous, and not the vicious,

⁵ I thank Christiana Olfert for pointing out this possible reading to me.

could plausibly be understood to act for the sake of the collective happiness of all. The vicious, by contrast, surely act for the sake of their own individual happiness (see 1169a6-15). As a result, one could not say without qualification, as Aristotle appears to above, that happiness is a “simply final end” or that “we all do all of the remaining things for the sake of happiness.” The reason is that virtuous people would actually choose their own happiness for the sake of a further goal, namely, the collective happiness of all. But neither could we say unqualifiedly that “the happiness of all” is a “simply final end” or that “we all do the remaining things for the sake of the collective happiness of all,” since vicious people do not act ultimately for the sake of this end, but rather their own happiness.

We therefore have to give a very qualified readings of the above two seemingly unqualified claims. Namely, when Aristotle claims that happiness is a simply final end, he really means, “for any given person, either their own happiness or the collective happiness of all is, for them, a simply final end.” And when he claims, “we all do the remaining things for the sake of happiness,” he really means “we all do the remaining things either for the sake of our own individual happiness or for the sake of the collective happiness of all.” And further, when he claims “nobody chooses happiness for the sake these things (sc. “virtue, pleasure, honor, and awareness”) and neither generally for the sake of anything else” (1097b5-6), he really means “there is nobody who chooses both their own happiness and the collective happiness of all for the sake of a further goal,” since virtuous people, if they act ultimately for the sake of the collective happiness of all, would actually choose their own individual happiness for the sake of this further goal. But if Aristotle had such qualified claims in mind, one would have expected him to be more explicit about it.

There are two further difficulties with the collective reading. First, on this reading, Aristotle would fail to point to a simply final goal that applies to all human action. Rather, he would only be pointing to different goals that are simply final for some, but not all, human action. But it seems, to the contrary, that he intends to identify an ultimate goal that applies to all human action (1094a18-26, 1095a14-20, 1097a15-24).

Second, if virtuous people subordinate their own personal happiness to the happiness of all, there would be no need for Aristotle to revise, as he does, the popular view that only vicious, and not virtuous, people are φίλαυτοι (“self-lovers,” 1168a28-1168b1, 1168b19-31; Irwin, *Reformation*, 125, note 27). For, on this reading, he would actually accept this view. Virtuous people really would be distinguished from vicious people by the fact that they subordinate their personal good to a higher end, namely, the collective happiness of all.

In sum, it is better not to adopt the collective reading, unless, of course, other parts of the text compel us to do so. We will consider whether other parts of the text do in fact compel us when I examine the challenges that have been made against the traditional interpretation. For now, I will set down Aristotle’s claims that (a) we do all of the remaining things for the sake of happiness and (b) (our own) happiness is a simply final end as evidence for the traditional interpretation.

Prudence

It is sometimes argued that Aristotle’s account of the virtue of prudence (φρόνησις) suggests that the ultimate goal of practical deliberation is one’s own happiness (see Irwin, *Reformation*, 125, note 27). Aristotle does say that “prudence” tends to name the virtue by virtue of which one discovers what is best for oneself (1140a25-28, 1141b29-31). However, as Mckerlie well points out, he also allows that “prudence” names a broader genus which includes species that

are directed towards what is good for others in addition to the species (also called “prudence”) that is directed towards what is good for oneself (1140b7-11 1141b31-3; “Aristotle and Egoism,” 553, note 17). We therefore cannot conclude from that fact that prudence in the specific sense names a power to discover what is good for oneself that one’s own happiness is the ultimate goal of each person’s practical deliberation. Nevertheless, a case can be made that Aristotle’s account of prudence suggests that this is the case.

If we assume that people can stand back and deliberate about whether to pursue their own happiness or rather the happiness of others, then there should be a prudence-like virtue on account of which people would make this deliberation well (compare 1142b31-3). But this virtue cannot be prudence in the specific sense, since that only discovers what is best for oneself, not whether one should aim at what is best for oneself or rather what is best for others. Neither could this virtue be one of the other species of prudence, since they only discover what is good for a given human being or group of human beings, not whether one should aim at what is best for oneself or rather what is best for others. Let us call this hypothetical virtue “non-prudential practical wisdom.” But Aristotle nowhere acknowledges the existence of non-prudential practical wisdom. This suggests that he did not think it was possible for us to stand back and deliberate about whether to aim at our own happiness or rather the happiness of others.

The lovable

That Aristotle intends to posit each person’s own happiness as the ultimate end of their action is also supported by his account of the lovable (τό φιλητόν). In VIII.2, Aristotle articulates three fundamental objects of love, the good (τὸ ἀγαθόν), the pleasant (τὸ ἡδύ) and the useful (τὸ χρήσιμον). After defining the useful as what produces what is pleasant or good (1155b19-21), he asks whether people love “the good” (τὰγαθόν) or rather “that which is good for themselves (τὸ

αὐτοῖς ἀγαθόν).” He answers that each person loves what is good for himself and that while the good is lovable “simply” (ἀπλῶς) that which is good for each person is lovable for each person. Aristotle thus contrasts “the good” and “that which is good for a person.” It is common to read this contrast as identical to the one he spells out earlier in his discussion of justice, namely, that between what is good ἀπλῶς—good “simply” or “without qualification”—and what is good for someone given their actual condition or situation (1129b1-6).⁶ To give an illustration, it is simply bad (and not good) to have one’s appendix removed, but it is good for someone suffering from appendicitis.

However, another reading of this contrast is possible. Notice that while Aristotle explicitly contrasts “lovable ἀπλῶς” with “what is lovable for each person,” he does not explicitly contrast “good ἀπλῶς” with “what is good for each person,” but rather, “the good.” Since he expresses the contrast concerning the lovable in terms of ἀπλῶς, but not the one concerning the good, we may suspect that he has a different contrast in mind. If so, we could take the contrast concerning the good to be between the larger class of “what is good” in the sense of “good for someone, regardless of who they are” and the more restricted class of “what is good for myself.” For example, your health is something that is good for someone; it therefore belongs in the first class. But it is not good for me; it therefore does not belong in the second.

Whichever reading of the contrast between “the good” and the “good for oneself” we adopt, one result will be the same. What is lovable for each person—that is, actually lovable for them given their actual condition—is what is actually good for them. I, therefore, do not love

⁶ Those who read the contrast in this way include Aspasius (*In Ethica Nicomachea Commentaria*, 162, line 15-25), Aquinas (*Commentary*, paragraphs 1553-4), J. A. Stewart (commentary ad loc.), and Lorraine Pangle (*Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, 37, bottom paragraph). Pakaluk mentions this reading, but doesn’t entirely commit to it (*Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, Books VIII and IX*, 58).

what is good for you merely because it is something that is good for someone. Only if what is good for you were also good for me (or appeared so) would I actually be capable of loving it (Aquinas, *Commentary*, paragraphs 1553-4; Pangle, "Friendship and Self-Love in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," 173, first paragraph, though contrast 195-6). As Aristotle puts it in the *Eudemian Ethics*, "That which is not good for oneself is nothing to oneself" (1236b38; compare *Magna Moralia* II.xi.8).

This same result then applies to happiness insofar as it is the "best good." The happiness that we are actually capable of loving is therefore that which is actually good for us, and this is clearly our own. Of course, we could also love the happiness of another, but only on the condition that it was also good for us; that is, only on the condition that it also contributed to our own happiness. Aristotle's claim that what is loveable for each person is what is good for them thus implies that it is our own happiness that he intends to posit as the ultimate end of our action.

Michael Pakaluk may seem to challenge my reading of this passage. He says,

We should not interpret the claim that it is a necessary condition that anything loved "as an end" is good or pleasant to (or for) the lover as committing Aristotle to egoism, in any of its usual forms. As we said, the idioms "to the lover" or "for the lover" (simply the dative case in Greek) are rather indistinct; they seem intended to suggest that *some* sort of relation holds between the thing loved and the lover, in virtue of which the lover is somehow better off. They need not in particular be taken to imply that what is loved contributes to the "interests" or "self-interest" of the lover, in the usual sense of those words. (*VIII and IX*, 58, his emphasis).

However, whether Pakaluk is challenging the reading I outlined above hinges on what he means by “egoism in any of its usual forms” and “‘interests’ or ‘self-interest’...in the usual sense of those words.” He grants that “some sort of relation holds between the thing [i.e., good] loved and the lover, in virtue of which the lover is somehow better off.” This clearly commits Aristotle to some form of egoism. It seems charitable, then, to read Pakaluk as cautioning us against assuming that this egoism is the “usual” sort—for example, that it precludes concern for virtue or the good of others.

Similarly, according to the usual sense of “interest” and “self-interest,” whatever makes me “better off” for that reason advances my interests or self-interest. It therefore seems charitable to take Pakaluk to mean that we need not attribute to Aristotle the “usual” understanding of what things are (or are not) in our interest—for example, that virtue or the happiness of others is not an intrinsic part of our interest. But, so understood, Pakaluk does not challenge my reading of the lovable. He merely warns us against being presumptuous about what sorts of things Aristotle thinks are or are not good for oneself.

There is one further challenge to my reading. Ἀγαθόν (“good”) in Aristotle’s discussion of the lovable is sometimes read as “good” in the sense of “virtuous or excellent something” rather than in the sense of “good for a human being,” as is, for example, health or knowledge.⁷ Scholars are inspired to this reading because Aristotle later says that “perfect” friends love each

⁷ This reading is common. John Cooper (“Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship,” 317, bottom paragraph, 321, bottom paragraph) and Broadie (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 57, second paragraph) offer clear examples. Further examples include A. W. Price (*Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, 104, top paragraph), Irwin (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 274, note to paragraph §3), David Konstan (*Friendship in the Classical World*, 72-4), Ronna Burger (*Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*, 164, first paragraph), Alexander Nehamas (“Aristotelian *Philia*, Modern Friendship?” 224, second paragraph and note 29), and Patrick Lee Miller (“Finding Oneself with Friends,” 323, bottom paragraph, 327, bottom paragraph). The contrary reading I prefer can be found in Arthur Adkins, “Friendship’ and ‘Self-Sufficiency’ in Homer and Aristotle,” 39, bottom paragraph.

other insofar as they have virtue (ἀρετή, 1156b7-12, 1162b6-7). Virtue, then, must be in some way lovable. They then read “virtue” back into the earlier list of lovable things by claiming that “virtuous or excellent something” is what Aristotle there means by ἀγαθόν. But it is clear that ἀγαθόν does not there mean this, but rather what is good in the sense of “good for a human being.”

First, as I have noted, at the beginning of his discussion of the lovable, Aristotle uses ἀγαθόν to define “the useful” (τὸ χρήσιμον), but the useful is properly defined as “that which produces what is good or pleasant for a human being” and not as “that which produces a virtuous or excellent something or pleasure.” Second, there is a perfectly clear Greek word that Aristotle could have used to signify the goodness of something as a ground for love: ἀρετή (compare 1106a15-21). Third, the “for oneself” (αὐτῷ) qualification that Aristotle introduces makes vastly better sense with ἀγαθόν in the sense of “good for a human being” than it does with it in the sense of “virtuous or excellent something.” If ἀγαθόν means the latter, then what is lovable for each person is “what is a virtuous or excellent thing to themselves”? But “to themselves” cannot mean “what seems to them to be such,” since he goes on to add “what appears to be such” (τὸ φαινόμενον) as a further qualification to what is ἀγαθόν αὐτῷ. And what would it mean for something to be a virtuous or excellent thing “to me,” if it does not mean that this thing seems to me to be a virtuous or excellent thing? Fourth, and finally, if ἀγαθόν here means “virtuous or excellent something” and not “what is good for a human being,” then Aristotle has obviously failed to give an adequate account of the lovable, for what is good for us in the sense of “good for a human being” is manifestly lovable to us as such.

Someone might respond to these difficulties by offering a hybrid reading. They could argue that ἀγαθόν above should be read as ἀγαθόν ἀπλῶς and that this phrase designates

ἀγαθόν in the “non-relative” sense of “virtuous or excellent something.” In other words, Aristotle wishes to claim that ἀγαθόν in the sense of “virtuous or excellent something” is lovable “simply” (ἀπλῶς), but ἀγαθόν in the different sense of good for that person (αὐτῷ ἀγαθόν) is what is lovable for that person.⁸ This reading appears to have the following advantages: it (i) explains Aristotle’s later statements that friends love each other on account of virtue; and (ii) still maintains that what is good for us is lovable to us as such.

However, the difficulty with the hybrid reading lies in the fact that ἀγαθόν bears fundamentally different senses on each side of the ἀπλῶς / αὐτῷ distinction. Aristotle’s other uses of this distinction require that the word that denotes the subject of the distinction maintain the same sense. For example, his earlier contrast between what is “good simply” and “good for a particular person” in his discussion of justice requires that “good” (ἀγαθόν) maintain the core sense of “good for a human being.” This is clear from that fact that unjust people excessively pursue the things that are “good simply” without paying sufficient attention to whether “the simply good things are also good for themselves” (1129b5-6). Likewise, Aristotle’s distinction in the lovable passage between what is “lovable simply” and “lovable for a particular person” requires that “lovable” maintain the core sense of either “capable of being loved” or “compelling love.” Therefore, instead of trying to read “virtue” back into Aristotle’s list of lovable things, we should read the lovability of virtue in light of his earlier list.

Every intellect chooses what is best for itself

A third example that suggests that Aristotle intends to posit each person’s own happiness as an explanatory starting point is his claim in IX.8 that “every intellect (νοῦς) chooses what is best for

⁸ This reading is well described by Pakaluk (*VIII and IX*, 58), who is attracted to it, but also notes some of its difficulties (ibid., 72, *Introduction*, 265-6).

itself" (1169a17). This statement appears to be an example of synecdoche. The action of "choosing what is best for oneself" that properly belongs to the person that possesses intellect is being metaphorically attributed to the intellect through which he performs the action (compare "communication with an alien intelligence"). It is worth noting, in this regard, that one of the definitions of the good that Aristotle offers in the *Rhetoric* is "as many things as the intellect of each gives to each [itself]." (1362a25). In other words, the intellect here assigns good things not to itself, but to the person it is the intellect of.

On the other hand, one might claim, as some interpreters do, that Aristotle identifies each person with their intellect or mind and that he therefore means the claim that each intellect chooses what is best for itself literally (for example, Charles Kahn, "Aristotle and Altruism," 29-30). That is, insofar as each person just is their intellect, and insofar as each person chooses what is best for themselves, each intellect chooses what is best for itself, literally speaking. But it is not true that Aristotle simply identifies each person with their intellect. He hedges and qualifies this identification with ἢ μάλιστα ("or most of all," 1169a2). Either each person is their intellect "or is most of all" their intellect.⁹ As for what it would mean for us to "most of all be" this part of ourselves, I take Aristotle to mean that we would come closer to being identical to this part than we do to any other. We would come closer to being identical to our intellect, than we would to, say, our foot; or, to put this point another way, if human beings had to be identical to one of their parts, then they would be identical to their intellect, and not some other part (Pakaluk, comment on 1168b31-4).

⁹ Geoffrey Percival observes this qualification well, and he takes it to express Aristotle's true view; see *Aristotle on Friendship*, 127, and note his editorial addition, "rather, to be accurate."

It is rather this second, qualified, identification that is suggested by Aristotle's earlier assertion that a human being, being the interweaving of thought and desire, is the "source" (ἀρχή) of action (1139b4-5; Christopher Bruell, "Aristotle on Theory and Practice," 22, first paragraph). It is also suggested by one of the ways he argues that we are—or "are most of all"—intellect or mind. He claims that any σύνστημα ("complex entity") is "most of all" its most authoritative part. Just as a city is "most of all" its ruling part, a human being is "most of all" its intellect or mind (1168b31-33). But this argument does not attempt to establish that a complex entity "just is" its most authoritative part. That would be absurd, for to be a complex entity at all, something must be a certain whole with parts. Rather, it attempts to establish that a complex entity, such as a human being, is "most of all" its most authoritative part. As Aquinas observes,

It is obvious from the discussion that everyone is his intellect or reason, or rather (since several other ingredients concur in the essence of man) it can be said that man is especially this part, i.e., intellect or reason because it is the formal and perfective element of the human species" (*Commentary*, paragraph 1872).

If we then read Aristotle's statement that each intellect chooses what is best for itself as an example of synecdoche, it restricts (at least non-akratic, 1168b4-5) choice to what is (or appears) best for oneself (Michael of Ephesus, *In Ethica Nicomachea Commentaria*, 506, lines 1-16; René Gauthier and Jean Jolif, commentary ad loc.; Erik Wielenberg, "Egoism and *Eudaimonia*-Maximization in the Nicomachean Ethics," 282, top paragraph). Consequently, if we do choose all things for the sake of happiness, it must be the particular happiness that is, or appears, best for ourselves, and this is clearly our own.

Lorraine Pangle considers but ultimately rejects this reading of the passage (*Friendship*, 177, bottom paragraph). She claims, instead, that every intellect pursues what is best for itself in the sense that it “rationally” pursues the (not always self-interested) ends of the being it is the intellect of (*Friendship*, 176, bottom paragraph, 179, bottom two paragraphs, 181). However, I cannot see how this is a gloss of intellect choosing “what is best for itself,” unless she posits in addition that what is always best for every intellect, but not the being whose intellect it is, is to make “rational” choices. I find this supposition doubtful, however. For one, it sharply divides the good of an intellect from the good of the individual whose intellect it is, so that an intellect is choosing what is best for itself even if it is choosing what is worse for the individual whose intellect it is (*ibid.*). And also, this supposition locates the greatest good for an intellect in the activity of practical deliberation and not theoretical contemplation. However, Aristotle seems to say that theoretical contemplation, and not practical deliberation, is the greatest good an intellect can achieve (1143b33-5, 1145a6-11, 1172a12-19).

Part II: The Challenge from Aristotle’s Account of Friendship

Some scholars challenge the traditional interpretation of Aristotle’s explanatory starting point that I have just given evidence for. I will consider two such challenges, the first of which draws on his discussion of friendship. He says in that discussion that “perfect” (τέλειον) friends wish good things for their friends “for their friends’ own sake” (ἐκείνων ἔνεκα, 1156b9-10; compare 1155b31-4). Some scholars conclude from this claim that Aristotle believes friends can benefit each other even while failing to aim at their own happiness and that, therefore, if happiness is to serve as the ultimate end of our action, it cannot simply be our own.

Two examples: Jennifer Whiting and Richard Kraut

Jennifer Whiting is one such scholar.¹⁰ She puts this point as follows:

In sum, we need not read the “eudaimonist axiom” as requiring that all actions be performed ultimately for the sake of the agent’s *own eudaimonia*: for Aristotle’s account of *philia* shows how, given human nature, it is *possible* to act directly for the sake of *another’s eudaimonia* (“*Philia*,” 302).

Part of the reasoning that Whiting employs in concluding from Aristotle’s statement about perfect friendship that friends can benefit each other while failing to aim at their own happiness is given clear expression by Richard Kraut, who shares her non-egoistic interpretation of Aristotle’s explanatory starting point (*Human Good*, 144, bottom paragraph). He argues that “when one acts for the sake of another, one is not benefitting him merely as a means to some further goal. Instead, one is taking the good of that person that by itself provides a reason for action.” (*Human Good*, 79). Kraut further assumes that if the good of another constitutes a reason for acting, it must constitute a non-“self-interested” reason (*ibid.*). He thus argues that Aristotle’s account of perfect friendship, along with what he assumes is Aristotle’s belief that we can achieve this perfect friendship in relation to others, sufficiently justifies that Aristotle believes the good of our friend constitutes a non-self-interested reason for acting.

Kraut explicitly follows John Cooper in drawing this conclusion (*Human Good*, 79, notes 3 and 4). If we turn to Cooper, we see that he implies that if someone acts for the sake of another, he has a non-self-interested reason for acting. Concerning Aristotle’s use of the

¹⁰ Other scholars who make this same inference include Annas (“Self-Love,” 11-12; compare *The Morality of Happiness*, 259-60, though the point is less clear here), Pakaluk (*VIII and IX*, 201), Howard Curzer (*Aristotle and the Virtues*, 273), and perhaps Roger Crisp (“Nobility in the Nicomachean Ethics,” 240). I say “perhaps” because Crisp does not explicitly say that Aristotle thinks this sort of disinterested motivation can move us to act contrary to our concern for our own happiness; compare Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, 79, first paragraph.

qualification “for somebody else’s sake,” he says, “it is not implied that this [the well-being of the other] is the agent’s *only* reason for acting as he does, nor, in particular, that he does not **also** have a **self-interested reason** for acting.” (“Aristotle on Friendship,” 334, note 6, my bold).¹¹

I take it that Whiting joins Kraut and Cooper in concluding from Aristotle’s account of perfect friendship that friends have a non-self-interested reason for benefitting their friends. But she additionally concludes that Aristotle thinks (perfect) friends can benefit each other while failing to aim at their own happiness. Kraut, by contrast, is more cautious. He recognizes that even if the good of my friend counts as a non-self-interested reason for me to act, it is logically possible that it always “count for less” than my own good (*Human Good*, 79-81). To then discount this possibility, Kraut offers additional evidence that Aristotle believes we should in certain circumstances do what is worse for ourselves (*ibid.*, 85, bottom paragraph). Once he has secured this point, he concludes that Aristotle must also believe that it is possible for us to knowingly do what is worse for ourselves (*ibid.*, 83-4). And if we can knowingly do what is worse for ourselves, then it is not true that the ultimate end of our action is our own happiness.

There are thus two versions of the challenge to the traditional interpretation of Aristotle’s explanatory starting point from his account of perfect friendship. The first and most common, exemplified by Whiting, relies only on his statements about perfect friendship to conclude that he thinks it is possible for human beings to act for the benefit of their friends while failing to aim at their own happiness. The second, offered by Kraut, agrees with the first insofar as it also concludes from Aristotle’s statements about perfect friendship that he believes

¹¹ It is fairly common to understand “for the sake of another” as implying, to at least some degree, “not for the sake of oneself,” as Cooper here does. Further examples include Aquinas (*Commentary*, paragraph 1558, though note “it is said,” *dicitur*), Vlastos (“The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato,” 3, 33, note 100), Kahn (“Altruism,” 20, bottom paragraph, 30, bottom paragraph, however compare 32, bottom paragraph), Konstan (*Friendship*, 76-7 with 13-14), Pangle (*Friendship*, 38, bottom paragraph, 155), Nehamas (“*Philia*,” 223, bottom paragraph), and Crisp (note 10).

the happiness of a friend provides a non-self-interested reason for acting, but, in order to justify the further conclusion that he thinks human beings can act while failing to aim at their own happiness, it offers additional evidence.

The first difficulty for this challenge

There are two difficulties that speak against the success of either version of this challenge. The first is that it does not actually follow from the fact that a friend acts “for the sake of his friend” that he has a “non-self-interested reason” for acting. Kraut and Whiting therefore fail to sufficiently justify that Aristotle believes friends have a non-self-interested reason for benefitting their friends. To elaborate, it is clear enough that if I act “for the sake of my friend,” I must choose his good for its own sake. If I choose his good merely for the sake of some further thing, I am clearly not acting for his sake (Kraut, *Human Good*, 79, top). But it does not follow from this requirement that I have a “non-self-interested reason” for benefitting my friend.

At least some of the things that we chose for their own sake are things that are good for ourselves, namely, those things that are “good according to themselves” (ἀγαθὰ καθ’ αὐτά, 1096b13-19, 1097a25-b5, *Eudemian Ethics* 1248b18-19). It is therefore possible that a friend choose the good of his friend as something that is good according to itself or “intrinsically good” for himself; for example, it is possible that a friend pursue the happiness of his friend as an intrinsic component of his own happiness. And if so, then, although he acts for the sake of his friend, he would clearly have a self-interested reason for acting.¹²

Kraut, on the other hand, argues against this possibility:

¹² Kelly Rogers makes this point well (“Aristotle on Loving Another for His Own Sake,” 293, 300-302). See, also, also, Elijah Millgram, “Aristotle on Making Other Selves,” 375; Price, *Love*, 124; Irwin, *Reformation*, 219-20, though he is not quite consistent on this point. Compare “If I take this view of your ends in relation to mine, I act for your sake *as well as* for my own sake” (ibid., 220, my emphasis) with “In other-directed concern, A wants to do x for B for B’s own sake, *not for A’s sake*. Aristotle describes this attitude as ‘goodwill’ (*eunoia*).” (ibid., 217, my emphasis).

If one takes the good of another as a reason for action because promoting his good serves one's own, then one does not in fact take his good as something that *by itself* provides a reason for action. If one says, "I did it for his sake for my sake," the last three words undermine the claim made in the first part of the sentence." (*Human Good*, 137). And summarizing his point later, he says, "I am mystified by the notion that one's own good can provide a reason for benefitting others *for their sake*." (147).

However, Kraut's argument that one's own good cannot provide a reason to benefit another for their sake involves two confusions. This first is that he overlooks the possibility that the good of another constitutes an intrinsic good for oneself. He therefore limits self-interested reasons for benefitting others to merely instrumental ones:

The pure egoist says that even when one rightly promotes the good of others, doing so has *merely instrumental value*, for one is never to take the well-being of others as an independent reason for action. All of one's relationships with others are to be *instrumental*: if one benefits them at all, one should do so only as a *means* to one's own optimal good (*Human Good*, 78, my emphasis; see, also, 78-9).¹³

Kraut may overlook the possibility that the good of my friend provides me a non-instrumental self-interested reason for benefitting him because of the way he formulates "pure" egoism. He does not distinguish between pro tanto reasons and what I have most reason to do "all things considered." Thus, he does not formulate "pure" egoism as the position that (a) personal goods constitute all pro-tanto reasons for action; and (b) we have most reason to do whatever is best for ourselves. Rather, he says, "All legitimate *reasons* for actions, according to pure egoism,

¹³ Nehamas makes this same mistake ("*Philia*," 223, bottom paragraph, note "Without that, we are still in the domain of the *instrumental*," my emphasis).

must take this form: this act will maximize my own good.” (ibid., my emphasis). But this more aptly describes what, according to “pure” egoism, I have most reason to do, not what I have reason to do simply speaking.

The second, and related, confusion is that Kraut fails to distinguish between two different cases of having a self-interested reason to benefit another for their own sake. Since he overlooks the possibility that the good of another could be intrinsically good for oneself—as it would be if the happiness of a friend were a part of one’s own happiness—he takes it that the only way I could benefit my friend “for his own sake” for a self-interested reason is if I were to choose to “benefit my friend for his own sake” for my own sake—that is, if the object of my choice were not merely the physical action—“benefitting my friend”—but the physical action along with a certain intention or motivation—“benefitting my friend for his own sake,” all of which I am choosing for my own sake (ibid., 136-7 with 136, note 53). But, Kraut claims, such a choice “undermines” itself and is “unintelligible” (ibid.). He thus concludes that it is impossible to benefit a friend for their sake for a self-interested reason.

Now, I do not agree that the sort of action described above is unintelligible. It is not evidently self-contradictory, though Kraut is certainly correct that, in certain circumstances, it would be impossible for me to act like this. Say that I am not independently motivated to choose my friend’s good for its own sake. I may well believe that “benefitting my friend for his own sake” is a great good for myself (consider Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 296, note to paragraph §11). I may then benefit my friend in a misguided attempt to “benefit him for his own sake.” However, because I have no independent motivation to choose my friend’s good for its own sake, I will end up pursuing his good merely as means to my self-beneficial action of “benefitting

him for his own sake.” I will therefore fail to benefit my friend for his own sake (compare Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, III.2.1, 479-80).

On the other hand, if I did have independent motivation to choose my friend’s good for its own sake, and I also believed that “benefitting my friend for his own sake” was good for myself, then I could conceivably “benefit my friend for his own sake” for my own sake. In this case, I would have two separate reasons for acting. One would be the good of my friend. The other would be the benefit I receive by virtue of the way that I am independently motivated to act towards that good. There is nothing evidently self-contradictory about that.¹⁴

Be that as it may, the case of acting for the sake of another for a self-interested reason that I am proposing is not the one that Kraut claims is “unintelligible.” It is not a case of me choosing to act with a certain intention because acting with that intention is good for me. It is rather the case he overlooks, namely, choosing my friend’s good as something that is intrinsically good for myself—for example, as part of my own happiness. I say that in this case I do act for the sake of my friend, for to act for the sake of another is to choose their good for its own sake and I evidently do that.

However, my objections to Kraut’s stated arguments for why we cannot benefit a friend for his own sake for a self-interested reason may miss the point. It may be that what is ultimately motivating him is the following (unstated) view. Acting “for the sake of another” is not identical to choosing their good for its own sake. It requires more than that, namely, choosing the good of another (a) for its own sake; and (b) *as* or because it is the good of another. Thus, if I choose my friend’s good as or because it is something that is intrinsically good

¹⁴ Not distinguishing between these two cases is the flaw in Annas’ objection to Irwin in “Self-Love;” see 11-12.

for myself—for example, as or because it an intrinsic part of my happiness—then I do choose his good for its own sake, but since I choose it as or because it is an intrinsic good, I do not actually act for his sake.

This is not an impossible way to understand “for the sake of another.” I can only say that it is a controversial understanding and therefore should not be attributed to Aristotle without evidence. In the absence of this evidence, I think it is better to attribute to him the “minimalist” understanding of acting for the sake of another that I outlined above. And, on this understanding, it does not follow from the very fact that I do something for the sake of another that I have a non-self-interested reason for doing it. Aristotle’s claims about perfect friendship would then fail to logically commit him (at least, in his eyes) to the position that perfect friends have a specifically non-self-interested reason for benefitting their friends.

However, even if acting for the sake of another does not logically preclude that one has a self-interested reason for acting, it is common to sharply distinguish between the actions we do for the sake of ourselves and the actions we do for the sake of others, and especially in the case of friends. That true friendship involves an unselfishly dedication to the good of one’s friends was a popular view among the Ancient Greeks (Konstan, *Friendship*, 12, bottom paragraph, 82, first paragraph; Pangle, *Friendship*, 142, second paragraph), just as it is one among us (Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality*, 75-7; Nehamas, “*Philia*,” 229, first two paragraphs). Kraut, Whiting, or Cooper could then point to this popular belief about friendship in order to support their claim that Aristotle believes friends have a non-self-interested reason for benefitting their friends.

But the fact that a view was widely shared in his day does not mean that Aristotle, who was a philosopher after all, also shared it. We have to look for ourselves and see what he says.

We will find that he was well-aware of this popular view. The supposed unselfishness of friendship is apparent in the definition he offers in the *Rhetoric*:

Let loving be wishing for someone that which one thinks is good for him, for that person's sake *but not for the sake of oneself* (ἀλλὰ μὴ αὐτοῦ), as well as being productive of these things according to one's ability. And a friend is one who loves and is loved in return. (1380b35-1381a2, my emphasis).

However, the *Rhetoric* provides definitions and premises for use in popular speeches (1355a24-29, 1358a36-b8). Aristotle may not have personally accepted all of its premises and definitions. We must turn to the more philosophical *Nicomachean Ethics* for a surer indication of his considered views (Irwin, "Ethics in the *Rhetoric* and in the *Ethics*," 147-150; Pakaluk, *VIII and IX*, 63, first paragraph).

A comparison between the equivalent definitions of friendship in the two works is indeed revealing. Friendship is first defined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as "goodwill among those who experience it in return while not escaping each other's notice" (1155b33-4), while "goodwill" (εὐνοία) is said to be "wishing good things for the sake of that person" (1155b31-2). Aristotle thus leaves out the "but not for one's own sake" (ἀλλὰ μὴ αὐτοῦ) or any equivalent phrase. In contrast to the *Rhetoric*, he refrains from defining friendly love as unselfish in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹⁵

Aristotle's further claims about friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* support the conclusion that this omission is significant. Immediately after stating the above definition, he

¹⁵ The important difference between these two definitions is often overlooked; see, for example, Vlastos, "Individual," 3, 33, note 100; Annas, *Happiness*, 249; Cooper, "Friendship," 302, 304. Even Price, who astutely observes that wishing a friend to have good things "for his sake" is logically compatible with wishing for his possession of good things as an intrinsic component of one's own happiness, overlooks this difference; compare *Love*, 124 with 149, bottom paragraph.

says that friends wish good things for one other “on account of (διὰ) one of the things mentioned before.” (1156a5). But “the things mentioned before” are the lovable things (τὰ φιλητά) that I discussed above, namely, each person’s own good or pleasure and what is productive of such. Friends therefore wish good things for each other on account of their own good, pleasure, or utility, and this sort of wishing evidently fails to be unselfish or “not for the sake of oneself” (Pangle, “Self-Love,” 173, first two paragraphs; Kathryn Sensen, “On the Nature of Friendship in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics,” 46-7).

Cooper and Whiting argue to the contrary that “on account of the things mentioned before” above does not refer to what is good, pleasant, or useful for ourselves as lovable features that explain our love—for example, that we love our friend’s good because it is something that is good, useful, or pleasant for us. They claim, rather, that it refers to what is good, pleasant, or useful for ourselves as a preceding condition that causes our love, just as being dehydrated is a preceding condition that causes us to desire water, but is not itself the object of our desire (Cooper, “Forms,” 322, bottom paragraph; Whiting, “*Philia*,” 284-7). They thus understand Aristotle to claim, not that we wish for our friends to possess good things because it would be useful, good, or pleasant for ourselves, but rather that we wish for our friends to possess good things because of the preceding condition that they have been good, useful, or pleasant for us.

However, their reading is implausible. It is far more natural to read διὰ as referring to the just discussed “responsibility” born by the lovable features of the things we love; that is, since human beings are only capable of loving things that bear (or appear to them to bear) certain features—being useful, good or pleasant for themselves—the fact that something bears (or appears to bear) one or more of these features is part of what explains our love for it. We

can therefore say that something is loved “on account of” (διά) one or more of these features (Pakaluk, *VIII and IX*, 54-5; for the superiority of this sort of reading, see Price, “Love,” 151, bottom paragraph).

A further example from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that contrasts with the popular view of friendship presented in the *Rhetoric* is Aristotle’s claim that a friend will not actually wish for his friend to become a god, even though this is the greatest imaginable benefit that could befall his friend (1159a6-11).¹⁶ Aristotle’s explanation for why we would not wish this great benefit for our friend is that having a friend is a great personal good and there can no longer be any friendship between ourselves and a god (1159a3-5, 7-8). He then concludes, “[the friend] will wish the greatest goods for [his friend] as a human being (i.e., not as a god), but he will perhaps not wish all good things for him, for each person most of all wishes the good things for himself.” (1159a10-12). Thus, the friend cares more about the personal good he finds in having a friend than he does about the happiness of his friend per se (Aquinas, *Commentary*, paragraphs 1636-8).

Now, Aristotle’s conclusion that our love for our own good limits the good things that we will wish for our friends does not logically exclude that friends love each other in a selfless way. Perhaps friends selflessly wish good things for their friends when their friends’ possession of these goods does not significantly conflict with their own good. Nevertheless, the alleged absence of selfless love among friends in cases where the good of the friend would be significantly detrimental to the other does plausibly suggest that friends fail to love each other in a selfless way.

¹⁶ On the blessed existence of the gods, see 1166a21-2, 1178b8-9, *Eudemian Ethics* 1245b14-19; *Symposium* 202c6-9, *Definitions* 411a3; *De Natura Deorum* I.44-5.

However, it is possible to make a stronger argument in the following way. If, in Aristotle's understanding, friends did love each other in a selfless way, then there should be some situations in which we would wish our friend to possess a good that required us to suffer a loss, namely, whenever the benefit that our friend would receive would greatly outweigh the loss that we ourselves would suffer (Pangle, *Friendship*, 181-2). But our friend becoming a god is one of these situations. The benefit that our friend would receive can even be said to infinitely outweigh the (finite) loss that we would sustain, for our friend would gain the *eternal* possession of perfect happiness. But Aristotle denies that in this situation we would wish for our friend to possess this good. He therefore denies that we love our friends in a selfless way.

John Burnet, Gauthier and Jolif, and Irwin, on the other hand, give a reading of Aristotle's denial that a friend would wish his friend to become a god that softens its apparent egoism. They take him to mean that a friend would not wish one's friend to become a god because this would deprive the apotheosized friend of one's own friendship, which is an important good (Burnet, commentary ad loc.; Gauthier and Jolif, commentary ad loc.; Irwin's translation of this passage in *Nicomachean Ethics* and 280, note to paragraph §6). However, this reading overlooks the fact that the Greeks considered gods to be perfectly blessed beings as well as contradicts Aristotle's own statements to this effect (note 16; Cooper, "Forms," 326, note 19; Pakaluk, *VIII and IX*, 97, bottom paragraph). His point is rather that the human friend is worried about himself being deprived of the good of friendship (Aspasius, *Commentaria*, 179, lines 12-16; Aquinas, *Commentary*, paragraphs 1636, 1638; Alexander Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, Vol. 2, 265, note 6; Percival, *Friendship*, 43; Pakaluk, *ibid.*).

Irwin and Gauthier and Jolif also understand Aristotle's comment that a friend will wish the greatest goods for his friend "as a human being" to simply state a consequence of his

essentialism. Because human beings are essentially such they could not actually become gods. To become a god is therefore not the greatest *possible* good that we could wish for a friend (1166a19-22; Gauthier and Jolif, comment on 1159a10; Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, note to paragraph §6). But Aristotle's point is rather that a friend will not wish what he believes to be the greatest good for his friend if it would mean being deprived of the good of friendship in an uncompensated way. That this "greatest good" turns out to be actually impossible is irrelevant (1111b19-23; Aspasius, *Commentaria*, 179, lines 9-13; Jens Timmermann, "Why We Cannot Want Our Friends to Be Gods. Some Notes on 'NE' 1159a5-12," 211, third paragraph). Moreover, wishing one's friend to become a god simply serves as a vivid example and is inessential to Aristotle's general point (note οἷον, "for example," at 1159a5). Hence Aquinas: "He says that from the discussions a doubt arises whether men can wish their friends the greatest goods, for example, that they be gods or kings or most virtuous." (*Commentary*, paragraph 1636, my emphasis; see, also, Timmermann, "Gods," 212; Pangle, *Friendship*, 216, bottom paragraph).

A further example of how in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle diverges from the popular account of friendship in the *Rhetoric* is his depiction of the motivation of friends who choose to die on behalf of their friends. He does grant that a virtuous friend will do this (1169a18-20), but only after he explicitly denies that virtuous people overlook their own good when they act toward their friends. He observes that it is a popular view that the virtuous person acts "on account of *to kalon*,"¹⁷ and for the sake of a friend, and disregards what concerns himself (τὸ δ'

¹⁷ Καλόν is notoriously difficult to translate. In order to avoid forcing an inaccurate translation of so important a term, I will transliterate the word into roman characters as *kalon* (singular) and *kala* (plural). The best indication I can give of the meaning of the word in ethical contexts is to point out that it is the antonym of ἀισχρόν—"shameful" or "disgraceful." If I were forced to choose among the common translations for this word in ethical contexts, I would choose "noble."

αὐτοῦ παρήσιν, i.e., disregards his own good). (1168a34-5). But, Aristotle replies, “the deeds (or “facts,” τὰ ἔργα) do not agree with these speeches (λόγοι).” (1168a35-b1). He therefore denies that virtuous people act in a self-disregarding way, even when they act towards their friends.¹⁸

As I have said, after Aristotle makes this denial, he does grant that virtuous friends will die on behalf of their friends, but he explains their action in accord with this denial. That is, he explains the apparent sacrifices that virtuous friends make not by appealing to selfless love, but rather by claiming that virtuous friends choose *kala* deeds, such as dying on behalf of their friends, on the grounds that these deeds constitute great personal goods. I quote this section in full:

Every intellect chooses *what is best for itself* (τὸ βέλτιστον ἑαυτῷ), and the virtuous person *obeys his intellect* (πειθαρχεῖ τῷ νῷ). And it is true that it belongs to the virtuous person to also do many things for the sake of his friends and his fatherland, and even if it should be necessary, to die on their behalf, for he will give away money and honors and on the whole the goods that are fought over, *while securing for himself what is kalon*. *For he would choose to enjoy intense pleasure for a little time rather than slight pleasure for a long time* (περιποιούμενος ἑαυτῷ τὸ καλόν· ὀλίγον γὰρ χρόνον ἡσθῆναι σφόδρα μᾶλλον ἔλοιτ’ ἂν ἢ πολὺν ἡρέμα), and to live nobly for a year than to live in

¹⁸ That Aristotle here denies that virtuous people overlook their own good when they act toward their friends is observed by Michael (*Commentaria*, 500, line 29- 501, line 3 with 501, lines 23-26) and Burger (*Dialogue*, 174, first paragraph). Broadie seems to observe the point; see her comment on IX 8, 1168a28-1169b2, and note “vulgarly deemed unselfish,” though she loses the point in what follows; see her comments on 1168b25-8, 1168b29-30. Kraut, on the other hand, discusses this section (*Human Good*, 115-128), but overlooks this important point (esp. 119-21, 126-7). As far as I can tell, he does not see that Aristotle’s over-arching question of whether we should love ourselves or another most leads him to consider whether virtuous people really do overlook their own good for others, as many in fact claim (1168a28-b1).

whatever chance way for many years, and one great and *kalon* deed rather than many small ones. And perhaps this is what occurs for those who die for others. *They choose a great and kalon thing for themselves* (αἰροῦνται δὴ μέγα καλὸν ἑαυτοῖς), and they will give away money in order that his friends will get more, for there will be money for his friends, but for himself, what is *kalon*, and *he distributes the greater good to himself* (τὸ δὴ μεῖζον ἀγαθὸν ἑαυτῷ ἀπονέμει). (1169a17-29, my emphasis).

Julia Annas, followed by Michael Pakaluk, argues to the contrary that, although Aristotle here says that the virtuous person who dies for his friend is “securing for himself what is *kalon*” and “assigning himself the greater good” and “choosing to enjoy intense pleasure,” he does not actually think any of this is the intention of the virtuous person when he acts (note 10). Rather, the virtuous person aims exclusively at the good of his friend and chooses ‘what is best, most *kalon*, and most pleasurable for himself’ in a merely incidental way.

But this really cannot stand as a plausible reading of the text. The fact that Aristotle consistently describes what would otherwise appear to be self-disregarding actions in explicitly self-regarding terms clearly suggests the attribution of self-regarding intentions.¹⁹ Moreover, these descriptions occur in the immediate context of (a) Aristotle’s flat out denial that virtuous

¹⁹ That Aristotle is attributing self-regarding motivation to those who appear to sacrifice themselves for others is also the view of Heliodorus (*In Ethica Nicomachea Paraphrasis*, 201, line 28- 202, line 11, note “one must also resolve the first speech, on account of which the virtuous person seemed not to be a self-lover, because he neglects what concerns himself,” λυτέον δὲ καὶ τὸν πρῶτον λόγον, δι’ ὃν ἐδόκει τὸν ἀγαθὸν μὴ εἶναι φίλαυτον, ὅτι τῶν μὲν ἑαυτοῦ ἀμελεῖ), Aquinas (*Commentary*, paragraphs 1878-1883), Allan (*Aristotle*, 138), Price (*Love*, 113), Irwin (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 295, note to paragraph §1, 296, notes to paragraphs §9 and §11), Pangle (“Self-Love,” 192-3), though she does think that in other cases genuine sacrifice for a friend is possible (195, bottom paragraph), Bostock (*Ethics*, 177, bottom paragraph), Wielenberg (“*Eudaimonia*-Maximization,” 282-4), Crisp (“Iris Murdoch on Nobility and Moral Value,” 285), though, as I have noted, he allows for apparently self-disregarding, though perhaps not genuinely “self-sacrificial,” action in “Nobility” (239-40), and John Tutuska (“Aristotle on the Noble and the Good: Philosophical Imprecision in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,” 168-9); consider, also, C. C. W. Taylor, *Nicomachean Ethics: Books II-IV*, 89-92.

people overlook their own good when they act for their friends; (b) his attempt to show that the virtuous person is a φίλαυτος (“self-lover”) or that he loves himself most of all (1168a29-30, 1169a3-4, 1169a34-1169b1); and (c) his claim, which I discussed earlier, that every intellect chooses what is best for itself.

Additionally, Annas is motivated to this reading by the assumption that acting for another’s sake logically precludes acting for one’s own sake that I have cautioned against attributing to Aristotle (note 14; Pakaluk, *VIII and IX*, 200, bottom paragraph). Pakaluk, on the other hand, is motivated by the claim that:

Although it might seem that love and friendship require a kind of forgetfulness of oneself, and a full attention to another’s needs, Aristotle would apparently have an agent dwell on how much better off he is than are his friends, precisely while he does good things for his friends. (*VIII and IX*, 200).

However, this is a condition for love and friendship that Pakaluk himself supplies, not Aristotle. But even if Aristotle did accept it, it does not follow that he thinks human beings actually succeed in living up to it, at least with respect to others (consider 1168b9-10; compare Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 185). Furthermore, Pakaluk’s proposed solution that the virtuous person “foresees” but does not “aim at” the personal good of a *kalon* action is implausible (*VIII and IX*, 201). If the virtuous friend foresees that his *kalon* action will constitute a great good for himself, how can he not want that good? (Rogers, “Loving Another,” 300).

In conclusion, there is strong evidence that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle rejects the popular view that friends are selflessly dedicated to the good of their friends (Ross, *Aristotle*, 230-2; Allan, *Aristotle*, 138; Millgram, “Other Selves,” 376). This evidence speaks against the claim, essential to the most common version of the challenge to the traditional interpretation

from his account of friendship, that he thinks the good of a friend constitutes a non-self-interested reason for acting. It instead points to the conclusion that he thinks actual human friendships are best explained in terms of self-interested motivation. However, as I have mentioned, Kraut's version of this challenge appeals to evidence beyond Aristotle's discussion of friendship. To what degree his version can stand up to the contrary evidence I have offered depends upon the strength and cogency of this evidence. It is to this consideration that I will now turn.

Kraut's additional evidence

I will discuss what I believe Kraut takes to be his most decisive evidence that Aristotle believes human beings are capable of acting in disregard of their own happiness, namely, Aristotle's treatment of ostracism and the sharing of power in the *Politics* (Kraut, *Human Good*, 82-3, "Comments on Julia Annas' 'Self-Love in Aristotle,'" 21, 23). Kraut understands Aristotle to hold that it is just for equals in virtue to share ruling offices (*Politics* 1332b12-29). He then concludes that Aristotle believes a virtuous person should surrender political power whenever equal or just sharing demands it, even if they could successfully hold onto it (*Human Good*, 100-101).

However, according to Kraut, the life of moral virtue is the best life available to a human being who is incapable of theoretical activity. We can then imagine "a community of equally capable citizens who rightly take the political life to be the best they can achieve: none can develop the theoretical virtues, and so they devote their full energies to exercising the practical excellences" (ibid, 99). We can also imagine that there is a member of this community who uses his political authority to perform great acts of moral virtue (1177b16-17, 1094b5-10). But when he has used up his equal allotment of political authority, Kraut believes that Aristotle would say that he should give up his power even if by doing so he is choosing a worse life for himself when

it is possible for him to choose a better one (*Human Good*, 94-5, 95, note 22, 101-2). As I mentioned earlier, Kraut then concludes that, since Aristotle believes we should sometimes choose a worse life for ourselves, he also believes we are capable of knowingly doing so. Aristotle must then deny that we act ultimately for the sake of our own happiness, for otherwise, we would never choose a worse life for ourselves when we knew it was in our power to choose a better one.

Kraut's argument has been criticized—successfully in my view—by several scholars. Put briefly, the difficulty is that those who would choose to stay in power for the sake of performing great acts of moral virtue would unjustly deprive others of their share of ruling and so would corrupt their own virtuous activity (McKerlie, *Egoism*, 553, note 19; Wielenberg, "Eudaimonia-Maximization," 288-9; Gregory Salmieri, "Aristotle on Selfishness? Understanding the Iconoclasm of *Nicomachean Ethics* ix 8," 114). If, with Kraut, we assume that morally virtuous activity constitutes the best life for those who are incapable of theoretical activity, then it would actually be better for such a person to relinquish political authority rather than to unjustly grasp onto it.²⁰ That way, he both avoids continual injustice in the present and preserves the possibility of less corrupted acts of virtue in the future. For this reason, Kraut fails to make a persuasive case that Aristotle's account of ostracism and the sharing of power in the *Politics* is evidence that he believes human beings can act in knowing disregard of their own happiness.

²⁰ Surprisingly, Kraut himself mentions this possibility in a footnote, but he does not connect it to an objection against his main argument; see *Human Good*, 100, note 31. Wielenberg adds to this response by comparing the sharing of political authority to the virtuous person allowing his (virtuous) friend to perform a *kalon* action in his stead, which Aristotle claims is even more *kalon* (and therefore even more beneficial) than doing the action oneself (1169a32-4); see, "Eudaimonia-Maximization," 289-90, 292.

The second difficulty

I will now address the second difficulty for the challenge to the traditional interpretation from Aristotle's account of friendship. This difficulty stems from the way that both versions of the challenge are compelled to interpret his claim that "we all do everything else for the sake of happiness" to mean "the happiness of someone or other but not necessarily oneself." In other words, both versions of this challenge understand happiness to be an explanatory starting point insofar as our action always aims at someone or other's happiness, but not necessarily our own.

The difficulty is that if we do not necessarily aim at our own happiness, we should be able to deliberate and make a decision about whether to pursue our own happiness or rather the happiness of others—for example, in cases where we believe our happiness and another's conflict. Kraut, clearly, and I think Whiting also, understand Aristotle to believe this (*Human Good*, 11, 86). However, according to Aristotle's account of deliberation, all deliberation takes place with regard to some guiding goal that is not itself an object of deliberation (1112b11-16, 1112b32-4). There is therefore some goal that guides our deliberation about whose happiness we are to pursue. What is this goal? Kraut himself is reluctant to say (*Human Good*, 11). Let us simply assume that there is some goal, as Aristotle's account requires. This goal, whatever it is, is the (or a) goal that guides our deliberation about whether to pursue our own or another's happiness.

However, this goal cannot be identical to either our own or another's happiness. If it were identical to either one, we would not actually deliberate about whether to pursue our own or another's happiness. We would rather deliberate about the way to secure our own or another's happiness as an already set end. There is therefore at least one goal that we do not pursue for the sake of our, another's, or plausibly anyone else's happiness, for we deliberate

and make a decision about whose happiness to pursue for the sake of achieving this very goal. But then, Aristotle's claim that everyone does "everything else" for the sake of happiness, even "someone or other's happiness," will be false.²¹

In truth, I suspect that Kraut has something quite plausible in mind as the goal that guides this sort of deliberation. The goal I would offer on his behalf is "the most choiceworthy," understood (a) *de dicto*; and (b) potentially distinct from any given person's happiness. If someone decides to sacrifice his own happiness for the sake of another's, it is because he believes that making this sacrifice will secure what is most choiceworthy given the circumstances. But if our deliberations about whose happiness we are to pursue are guided by the goal of "the most choiceworthy," as understood above, then it is rather this goal, and not any particular person's happiness, that would more plausibly be the ultimate end of our action.

"The most choiceworthy," as understood above, may be the true end of human action, but I do not think that this is Aristotle's view. Kraut has in effect replaced happiness with a different explanatory starting point—one that I suspect he believes is more correct than the one that Aristotle actually proposes. As far as I can tell, he falls into this difficulty because he has not considered the consequence that if we deliberate about whether to pursue our happiness or rather someone else's, then, at least according to Aristotle, we must be making this deliberation in pursuit of some further goal that cannot be identical to either our own or the other's happiness.

²¹ The outlines of this argument were suggested to me in a conversation with Samuel Baker.

Part III: The Challenge from *To Kalon*

The popular understanding of *kala* actions

The second challenge to the traditional interpretation takes its bearing from Aristotle's account of virtuous action. According to that account, virtuous action is done "for the sake of *to kalon*" (τοῦ καλοῦ ἕνεκα); that is, it is done with the motivation or intention of doing what is *kalon*, "for this (sc. *to kalon*) is the end of virtue" (1115b12-13). However, *kala* actions—that is, "deeds" or "chosen actions" (πράξεις)—were popularly identified with actions that were done with a view to benefitting others but not oneself. This, at any rate, is what we see in Aristotle's popular description of *kala* actions in the *Rhetoric*:

As many things are *kala* as, being among the things chosen, someone does them *not for the sake of himself* (μὴ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα); and the things that are good generally, and also as many things as someone does on behalf of his fatherland while *disregarding what concerns himself* (i.e., his own good, παριδὼν τὸ αὐτοῦ); and the things that are good by nature; and *the things which are not good for oneself, for one does the things that are of this sort* (i.e., good for oneself) *for the sake of oneself* (καὶ ἂ μὴ αὐτῷ ἀγαθὰ· αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἕνεκα τὰ τοιαῦτα); and as many things as can belong to someone who has died rather than to someone who lives, *for the things that belong to the one who is living have more of the "for the sake of oneself"* (τὸ γὰρ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα μᾶλλον ἔχει τὰ ζῶντι); and as many actions as are for the sake of others, for they are *less for the sake of oneself* (ἧττον γὰρ αὐτοῦ); and as many things [i.e., actions] as are concerning others but not concerning oneself, and as many as concern those who have provided a benefit, for it is just; and benefactions conferred, *for they are not toward oneself* (οὐ γὰρ εἰς αὐτόν). (1366b36-1367a6, my emphasis; see, also, 1359a1-5).

Selfless benefaction runs as a common thread through this list. We can therefore conclude that, in at least Aristotle's estimation of the popular understanding, *kala* actions were unselfish actions that benefitted others (Edward Cope, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle with a Commentary*, Vol. 1, 166, note 16, Vol. 2, 154, note 9; William Grimaldi, comment on 1366b37; Crisp, "Murdoch," 291, note 29).

Gabriel Richardson Lear, on the other hand, argues that the *Rhetoric* does not describe *kala* actions as "altruistic," but "for the sake of fame and honor," though she does concede that the "fine" person "does not seek his own profit" ("Aristotle on Moral Virtue and the Fine," 125, first paragraph; see, also, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good: An Essay on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 134). Does Lear mean that Aristotle depicts *kala* actions as the disinterested pursuit of one's own honor and fame? Does she then mean that one's own honor and fame are pursued as things that are choiceworthy but not good for oneself (however, see 1360b19-28 and note δόξα ["reputation"] and τιμή ["honor"])? And that because a fine person does not benefit others for their own sake, but for the sake of his own honor and fame, which he apparently does not take to be good for himself, his actions "do not seek his own profit" but still fail to be "altruistic"?

If this is what she means, then she is straightforwardly contradicted by the text (1366b37-8, note ὑπὲρ πατρίδος ["in defense of one's fatherland"], 1367a3-4, note ἄλλων ἕνεκα ["for the sake of others"]). Lear is correct that at one place Aristotle indicates a connection between what is *kalon* and what brings oneself a good reputation (specifically, 1367a16-17), but she is incorrect that this passage explicitly depicts a good reputation for oneself as the goal of all *kala* actions (Lear, *ibid.*). 1390a1-3 is a more promising example, but it must be kept in mind that the *Rhetoric* is not an ethical treatise, but a collection of popularly

acceptable ethical premises. We should therefore not assume that every popular view harmonizes with every other or even with Aristotle's own views. Each premise, or related group of premises, stands on its own as a strand of popular opinion, though, in all fairness, Lear would disagree with this point (*Happy Lives*, 134, note 24).

Regardless, Lear's claim that the *Rhetoric* does not depict *kala* actions as "altruistic," but rather as the (disinterested?) pursuit of honor and fame is clearly problematic. Either (a) she must claim that the "fine" person does not seek his own honor and fame as something that is good, which is extremely implausible and is contradicted by other parts of the text; or (b) she must deny that Aristotle depicts *kala* actions as disinterested, which, again, is clearly contradicted by the text. However, Lear's broader point that not all the things that Aristotle describes as *kalon* in the *Rhetoric* are disinterested or even benefit others is surely correct ("Fine," 125; see, also, *Happy Lives*, 134-5). But let us distinguish between *to kalon*—the class or character of all things that are *kalon*—and *kala* actions—that is, motivated, intentional actions. My contention is that in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle describes *kala* actions as disinterested actions that benefit others.

The challenge as given by Irwin

We have seen that, in at least Aristotle's estimation, *kala* actions were popularly understood to be selfless. Does he employ this popular understanding of *kala* actions in the *Nicomachean Ethics*? Terence Irwin argues that he does ("Beauty and Morality in Aristotle," 250-2). If Irwin is correct, then Aristotle must deny that virtuous people act ultimately for the sake of their own happiness.²² As we have seen, Aristotle understands virtuous actions to be *kalon* (and for the

²² Jenneifer Whiting comes to a similar conclusion in "Eudaimonia, External Results, and Choosing Virtuous Actions for Themselves," though not from a consideration of *to kalon*, which she does not

sake of *to kalon*). But if virtuous people act ultimately for the sake of their own happiness, then their actions will fail to be “not for the sake of oneself” and so will fail to be *kalon* according to the popular understanding.

Irwin supports his claim that Aristotle maintains the popular understanding of *kala* actions from the *Rhetoric* with the observation that the contrast between *συμφέρον* and *καλόν* that appears there also appears in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (“Beauty,” 250). Irwin takes *συμφέρον* to mean “expedient” or “advantageous”—that is, what contributes towards one’s happiness (ibid.). Thus, both useful and intrinsic goods can be “advantageous” since they can both contribute, the one indirectly, the other directly, to our happiness. If *kala* actions are actions that are done with a view to benefitting others but not oneself, then it is reasonable that they are not always advantageous for oneself. Indeed, we saw above that Aristotle explicitly says in the *Rhetoric* that actions that are not good for oneself are *kalon* because one is not motivated to do such actions for one’s own sake (see, also, *Rhetoric* 1358b38-1359a5, 1389b36-1390a1). Therefore, if, as Irwin claims, Aristotle says or implies in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that *kala* actions are generally not advantageous for oneself, then there is good evidence that he is employing the popular understanding of these actions.

Irwin does offer an additional argument that draws on IX.8 (“Beauty,” 251), but it is based on an insufficient appreciation of the meaning of *φίλαυτος* (“self-lover”). It is correctly criticized by Crisp (“Nobility,” 239; compare Salmieri, “Selfishness,” 101-2), and I will not focus on it. The problem is that Irwin takes *φιλαυτία* (“being a self-lover”) to mean “having self-love”

extensively discuss (281, first paragraph). She argues that the requirement of choosing virtuous actions for their own sake is incompatible with intentionally choosing them for the sake of one’s own happiness (281-6). I do not see why, however. There is nothing absurd about “mixed” motivation or choosing something both for its own sake and for the sake of something else (1097a30-1097b5; *Republic* 357b4-c4; Kraut, “Comments,” 22).

rather than “loving oneself most of all” (1168a29-30, *Politics* 1263b2-5; Salmieri, *ibid.*). He then interprets Aristotle’s distinction between blameworthy and not blameworthy φιλαυτία as one between “selfish” and “unselfish” self-love (Irwin, *ibid.*). However, Aristotle is actually distinguishing between a blameworthy way of loving oneself more than others and a not blameworthy way of doing so. In effect, “blameworthy selfishness” and “not blameworthy selfishness.” If this sounds paradoxical, so much the better. That is exactly how Aristotle’s distinction would have sounded to many Greeks (Annas, *Happiness*, 261, bottom paragraph).

The meaning of συμφέρον; Crisp’s criticism of Irwin

I said above that Irwin takes συμφέρον to mean “advantageous.” He consequently understands any contrast between what is *kalon* and συμφέρον as one between what is *kalon* and what is (personally) advantageous. However, Irwin’s understanding of συμφέρον is disputed by Roger Crisp, who contends that συμφέρον rather means “(instrumentally) useful” (“Nobility,” 233-4).²³ He then claims, against Irwin, that Aristotle contrasts *kalon* with συμφέρον without implying that *kala* actions are not advantageous for those who do them (*ibid.*, 239).

²³ This is also the view of Heliodorus (*Paraphrasis*, 198, lines 32-36), Michael (*Commentaria*, 494, line 34-495, line 2), Peter Martyr Vermigli (*Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 312), Burnet (*The Ethics of Aristotle*, 85, note 7), H. H. Joachim (comment on 1168a9-27, note that he writes χρήσιμον, “useful,” for Aristotle’s συμφέρον), Gauthier and Jolif (comment on 1104b31-2, note that they translate συμφέρον by “l’utile,” “useful”), and Broadie (comment on 1168a11-12, note “the useful”), though her comment on 1104b31 actually implies that συμφέρον includes the good and not merely the useful. She claims there that, according to Aristotle, happiness is συμφέρον, *kalon*, and pleasant, but this can only be true if συμφέρον means “advantageous” and not “instrumentally useful,” for happiness, being “simply complete” (ἀπλῶς τέλειον), is never chosen for the sake of anything else (1097a33-b6). It is therefore not instrumentally useful.

Pakaluk, on the other hand, takes συμφέρον to mean the broader “advantageous” rather than narrower “instrumentally useful” (*VIII and IX*, see 110, bottom paragraph), though he is not quite consistent on this point; see his comment on 1168a9-12 and note “a virtuous person seeks advantageous goods only on condition that his acquisition and use of them are in accord with the appropriate reasoned principle” (my emphasis).

However, upholding this translation of *συμφέρον* leads Crisp into the following difficulty. At 1104b30-31, Aristotle names what is *kalon*, *συμφέρον*, and pleasurable as the three possible grounds of choice: “For the things in relation to choices and the things in relation to acts of avoidance are three, [for choice:] *kalon*, *sumpheron*, and pleasurable.” But if *συμφέρον* means “instrumentally useful,” then, unlike “advantageous,” intrinsic goods do not fall under its heading (1155b19-21). They are then excluded from being a ground of choice. But this is absurd. We clearly do choose some things as intrinsic goods (1097b2-4).

Crisp can be said to respond to this difficulty in the following way: “we should understand 1104b31 to be referring to the *καλόν* in its broadest sense, equivalent to the *ἀγαθόν* or *τάγαθά*.” (“Nobility,” 234).²⁴ He claims that in the passage about the grounds of choice *kalon* actually means “good” (*ἀγαθόν*). Intrinsic goods would then be included in the list of grounds of choice under the label of *kalon*.

In support of his claim that in the list of the grounds of choice *kalon* means “good” (*ἀγαθόν*) and *συμφέρον* means “useful,” Crisp cites the later list of lovable objects at 1155b18-21 (Crisp, *ibid.*). As we saw, this list mentions *ἀγαθόν* (“good”), *ἡδύ* (“pleasant”), and *χρήσιμον* (“useful”), but not *kalon*. He assumes that the list of the grounds of choice and the later list of lovable objects are identical. This would make *kalon* and *συμφέρον* in the list of the grounds of choice equivalent to *ἀγαθόν* (“good”) and *χρήσιμον* (“useful”) in the list of lovable objects.

However, it is not clear that these lists really are identical. I would say, to the contrary, that they are interestingly different. Aristotle is not being careless with his language. He is rather indicating in the later list that *to kalon*, as an object of pursuit, must ultimately be subsumed

²⁴ I am unsure if Crisp recognizes, and is attempting to respond to, this particular difficulty. Either way, what he says here can be treated as a response.

under the pleasant, good or useful (Pangle, *Friendship*, 37; compare 1168b28-30, 1169a16-b29). The first list is, as it were, from a point further back. It leaves open the possibility that *to kalon* is a ground of choice independent of the personally good or pleasant, as it was popularly thought to be (1168a33-5, note “because of *to kalon*,” compare *Rhetoric* 1359a1-5; see Cooper, “Reason, Moral Virtue, and Moral Value,” 265, bottom paragraph). The first list therefore stands closer to popular opinion, while the second represents a philosophical correction of it.

Crisp is similarly compelled to read *kalon* as “good” (ἀγαθόν) in the list of the grounds for being “choiceworthy” or “choosable” (αἰρετὸν) in the *Topics* (1105a27-8, 118b27-8; “Nobility,” 234, note 9). However, this list is actually prima facie evidence that συμφέρον means “advantageous” and not “instrumentally useful” (Cooper, *ibid.*). When Aristotle introduces this list in the *Topics* for the second time, he says,

Yet it remains to distinguish how many ways ‘the choiceworthy’ is said and *for the sake of what* (τίνων χάριν), namely, τὸ συμφέρον or *to kalon* or the pleasant. For that which is *useful* (χρήσιμον) with a view to all of these things or most of them would be more choiceworthy than that that which was not similarly useful. (1118b27-30, my emphasis).

Since (a) this list doesn’t mentioned “good” (ἀγαθόν); (b) Crisp limits τὸ συμφέρον to the useful; and (c) intrinsic goods obviously serve as grounds for being choiceworthy or choosable, he must again say that *kalon* here means “good” (ἀγαθόν). However, this passage actually implies that the things in this list, including τὸ συμφέρον, are choiceworthy as ends (τίνων χάριν) and stand in contrast to what is instrumentally useful (χρήσιμον) in relation to them.

To then mitigate this difficulty, Crisp introduces a distinction between “non-ultimate ends that are desirable not in themselves but only in so far as they further ultimate ends—here, the καλόν (i.e., τἀγαθά) and the pleasant” (“Nobility,” 234, note 9). He thus wishes to assign τὸ

συμφέρον to the class of “non-ultimate ends” and *to kalon* (which he must claim means ἀγαθόν or “good”) and the pleasant to that of “ultimate ends.”

This distinction among ends is not impossible for Aristotle. Although in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle clearly restricts “end” (τέλος) to what is chosen on account of itself (1248b18-19), in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he allows that not all “ends” are chosen on account of themselves or “complete” (1094a14-16, 1097a25-8). However, it would be awkward to read συμφέρον as “non-ultimate useful end” in the *Topics* passage. Aristotle is contrasting the grounds for what is choiceworthy or choosable, including τὸ συμφέρον, with what is “useful” (χρήσιμον) in relation to them, but, on Crisp’s reading, τὸ συμφέρον would essentially be something that is useful in relation to *to kalon* and the pleasant.

However, even if, as Crisp argues, συμφέρον means “non-ultimate useful end” in the *Topics* list, it would have to have yet another meaning in the Nicomachean list. Recall that on Crisp’s reading the Nicomachean list of the grounds of choice is identical to the list of lovable objects in VIII.2. This list has ἀγαθόν (“good”), ἡδύ (“pleasant”), and χρήσιμον (“useful”). Ἡδύ occurs in both lists. Crisp then matches *kalon* with ἀγαθόν and συμφέρον with χρήσιμον. But in the *Topics* passage, he has to claim that συμφέρον means “useful non-ultimate end” in contrast to χρήσιμον, which means “useful” in the general sense. We would then have two lists—one in the *Topics*, the other in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—with identical words—καλόν, συμφέρον, ἡδύ—that we, nevertheless, have to read as having different senses. This is an artificial result.

It is true that in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle locates *to kalon* within the class of intrinsic goods (1248b16-25). But *kalon* is there merely one kind of intrinsic good. It thus looks like Crisp is imposing the meaning of ἀγαθόν (“good”) onto *kalon*, perhaps in order to circumvent the difficulty caused by his translation of συμφέρον. Though perhaps he does not

intend that *kalon* literally means ἀγαθόν. Perhaps he is suggesting that Aristotle uses *kalon* to represent the more general class of ἀγαθά. He says *kalon*, but he indicates ἀγαθόν to us instead. But this suggestion is open to the objection that Aristotle says precisely what he means. He says *kalon* because *kalon*, and not ἀγαθόν, is exactly what he intends us to understand. And this is all the more likely since, as I have noted, *kalon* was popularly thought to be a ground of choice independent of the good.

The better solution to the apparent absence of intrinsic goods from Aristotle's list of the grounds of choice is to reject Crisp's translation of συμφέρον. Because he narrows and limits its meaning to "instrumentally useful," he excludes intrinsic goods from appearing under its heading. And because intrinsic goods are not included under the common meanings of the two other words, he is compelled to say that Aristotle means something other than the normal meaning of *kalon* in an ethical context (i.e., the contrary of "disgraceful" or "shameful"). But if we instead allow συμφέρον to mean "advantageous," intrinsic goods would by definition fall under its heading. The problem of the excluded class of intrinsic goods would then disappear.

Miles Burnyeat also reads συμφέρον (and not *kalon*) in the list of the grounds of choice as referring to "good" things ("Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," 86, bottom paragraph, 91, note 27). In support of this reading, he cites 1140a25-8 and 1141b4-8. However, the first reference speaks of "the things that are good for oneself and *sumpheron*" (τὰ αὐτῷ ἀγαθὰ καὶ συμφέροντα). It therefore leaves open the possibility that τὰ συμφέροντα and τὰ αὐτῷ ἀγαθὰ are non-identical classes that Aristotle is conjoining—that is, "the things that are good for oneself and the things that are useful." The second citation, however, is reasonably read as identifying τὰ συμφέροντα with "the human goods," i.e., "they do not investigate the human

goods” (οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἀγαθὰ ζητοῦσιν) is expegetical of “they are ignorant of the things that are *sumpheron* to themselves” (ἀγνοοῦντας τὰ συμφέροντα ἑαυτοῖς).

Despite the difficulties that his reading of συμφέρον as “useful” causes, it is possible that Crisp thinks his reading is necessary because of the following passage in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*:

Since the *sumpheron* lies before the one who gives council as a target, for people do not deliberate about the end, but about the things in relation to the end, and these things are what is *sumpheron* according to actions, and the *sumpheron* is good, it would be the case that one must grasp the elements concerning good and *sumpheron* simply. (1362a17-21).

Crisp quotes W. R. Roberts’ translation of this passage in which τὸ τέλος is rendered as “ends”—that is ‘any end’ (“Nobility,” 235, note 9). So translated, this passage does imply that τὰ συμφέροντα are instrumentally useful things. But this is not the only possible translation of τὸ τέλος. It could also be translated as “the end,” namely, happiness (Grimaldi, comment on 62a15).

Aristotle earlier declares happiness to be the end or “target” (σκοπός) of exhortation (προτροπή), discouragement (ἀποτροπή), choice, and avoidance (1360b1-13). Given this, it is well worthy of being referred to as “the end” (τὸ τέλος). Moreover, he tells us that “exhortation” and “discouragement” are the two exclusive parts of deliberation or council-giving (συμβουλή, 1358b8-10). But, as I said, he is explicit that both exhortation and discouragement ultimately take place in reference to happiness. Therefore, council-giving or deliberation (συμβουλή) must do so as well (Cope, *Rhetoric*, Vol. 1, 72, introduction to Chapter V). And if council-giving or deliberation ultimately take place in reference to happiness, then it is natural to understand Aristotle’s claim that those who are giving council or deliberating do not

deliberate about τὸ τέλος as referring not to “ends” but rather “the end” of council-giving or deliberation that is happiness.

That τὸ τέλος in the above passage means “the end,” which is happiness, and not “ends,” is also suggested by its context. The passage follows a long description of happiness and its parts (1360b14-1362a14). Aristotle undertakes this description for the stated purpose of elucidating what it is that exhortation and discouragement ultimately take place in reference to (1360b1-13). The above passage occurs right after this description of happiness and is thematically connected to it. This can be seen if we add in the text that proceeds Crisp’s quotation:

*That which one must aim at while exhorting [sc., happiness and its parts], as something that will be or that currently exists and also that which one must aim at while discouraging is then manifest, for these things are the contrary of those things. But since to *sumpheron* lies before the one who gives council as a target, for people do not deliberate about the end, but about the things in relation to the end, and these things are what is *sumpheron* according to actions, and to *sumpheron* is good, it would be the case that one must grasp the elements concerning good and *sumpheron* generally. (1362a15-21, my emphasis).*

The connection between the preceding discussion of happiness and the above passage appears to be the following. Aristotle has just finished his sketch of happiness and its parts. It is now clear enough what exhortation, discouragement, deliberation and council-giving ultimately aim at. But they obviously aim more proximately (“But since...as a target”) at the things that are conducive to happiness (“the things in relation to the end”), and these things are advantageous (συμφέρον) actions. For this reason, there is an additional need for Aristotle to consider in more

detail “good” (ἀγαθόν) and “advantageous” (συμφέρον).²⁵ This is the task that he then turns to (from 1362a20 to 1365b20). Thus, if τὸ τέλος in the above passages means “the end,” which is happiness, then τὰ συμφέροντα are all those things that contribute towards its realization. They are, as I have just translated them, “advantageous things.” In short, the above passage can be plausibly read in a way that speaks in favor of understanding συμφέρον as “advantageous” rather than “instrumentally useful.”

This understanding of συμφέρον can be further supported by appealing to two additional passages. The first is from the *Rhetoric*. According to Aristotle, a sub-class of the actions that we do “on account of ourselves” (δι' αὐτούς) and which we are “responsible for” (αἴτιοι) are those done “on account of calculation” (διὰ λογισμὸν). He further describes these actions as “the things that seem to be *sumpheron*, out of the previously mentioned goods, either *as an end* (ὡς τέλος) or as something in relation to an end, whenever they are done because they are *sumpheron*” (1369b7-9, my emphasis). But if some goods are συμφέρον “as an end,” then συμφέρον must embrace more than the instrumentally useful (Grimaldi, comment on 69b8).

The second passage is from the *Rhetoric to Alexander*, traditionally attributed to Aristotle, but now usually attributed to Anaximenes. The author of this work offers a series of definitions to aid those who are composing popular speeches, much as Aristotle does in his *Rhetoric*. These definitions are therefore helpful indications of the commonly understood meaning of certain terms, including συμφέρον, which our author defines as follows:

²⁵ Thus, the καί at 1362a21 is not expegetic, but conjoins the two mostly overlapping classes of ἀγαθόν and συμφέρον (compare Crisp, “Nobility,” 235, note 9); that is, though virtually every good thing is advantageous insofar as it contributes towards our happiness, happiness is one good thing that fails to be advantageous strictly speaking.

sumpheron is a guarding of existing goods or an acquisition of not already-present goods or a losing of already existing evils or a prevention of the coming into being of [otherwise] expected evils. (*Rhetoric to Alexander* 1.9).

According to this definition, the acquisition (κτησις) of an intrinsic good is συμφέρον (Grimaldi, comment on 89b37-8). But we acquire those intrinsic goods that are constituted by actions and activities by doing the action or activity in question. Thus, if contemplation is an intrinsic good, contemplating would be συμφέρον, even if this activity is not useful for the acquisition of further goods. Therefore, according to this definition, “advantageous” is a better translation of συμφέρον than “instrumentally useful.”

In conclusion, I do not believe that Crisp is correct that συμφέρον means either “useful” or “useful non-ultimate end” or that *kalon* has the “broad sense” of “good” (ἀγαθόν) and its antonym, αἰσχρόν (as I have mentioned, usually rendered as “shameful” or “disgraceful” in ethical contexts), has the broad sense of “personal evil” (κακόν). It would have to have this sense on his reading because Aristotle opposes three grounds of avoidance (τῶν εἰς τὰς φυγὰς, 1104b31-2) to the three grounds of choice, namely, αἰσχρόν (opposed to καλόν), βλαβερόν (“harmful,” opposed to συμφέρον), and λυπήρον (“painful,” opposed to ἡδύ, “pleasant”).²⁶ I therefore conclude that Irwin is correct to understand συμφέρον as the broader “advantageous,” while Crisp is making a mistake when he limits its meaning to the narrower “instrumentally useful.”

²⁶ Note that this list provides more evidence that συμφέρον does not mean “instrumentally useful,” since βλαβερόν clearly means “harmful” rather than “useless” (ἄχρηστος).

Further examination of Irwin's evidence

Now that I have defended Irwin's understanding of συμφέρον as "advantageous," I will look more closely at his evidence that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle contrasts what is *kalon* with what is advantageous for oneself. Irwin cites 1125a11-12, 1162b35-1163a1, 1168a9-12, and 1169a3-6 as examples of this contrast. However, the first two passages do not obviously provide the contrast he claims they do. They use the term ὠφελιμος rather than συμφέρον, and Aristotle earlier uses ὠφελιμος in the precise sense of "instrumentally beneficial" or productive of an intrinsic good: "separating out the things that that are [good] according to themselves from the beneficial things (ἀπὸ τῶν ὠφελίμων), let us consider if they [the things good according to themselves] are said according to one form." (1096b14-16, my emphasis). It is certainly possible that in the first two passages (1125a11-12 and 1162b35-1163a1) Aristotle is using ὠφελιμος in a broader sense than he does in the above passage, but that is not obvious.²⁷ And if he consistently uses ὠφελιμος in the above sense, then these passages would contrast what is *kalon* with what is instrumentally beneficial. And this contrast is not enough to make Irwin's case. He needs a contrast between what is *kalon* and what is good or advantageous for someone *tout court*.

²⁷ The first passage is plausibly read as contrasting beautiful but otherwise useless possessions (compare 1123a6-9) with useful ones; see Ross' translation. Aspasius perhaps reads the second passage as contrasting *to kalon* with what benefits oneself, depending on whether he uses ὠφελεῖσθαι in a broad or narrow sense (*Commentaria*, 185, lines 27-30). Grant reads the second passage as contrasting what is *kalon* and "disinterested" with what is "expedient," "profitable," and "self-interested" (*Ethics*, Vol. 2, 277, notes 7-8). Ross, taking ὠφελιμος in the second passage to have a broad sense, also reads the passage as contrasting what is *kalon* with what is advantageous to oneself; see his translation of the passage and compare his narrower translation of ὠφελιμος at 1096b15. Although Gauthier and Jolif read ὠφελιμος in the second passage as "useful," they also take this passage to contrast what is "disinterested" and *kalon* with what is in one's own interest (comment on 1162b35-6). Pakaluk, on the other hand, reads the second passage as contrasting the "noble goods" with what is "useful" (*VIII and IX*, 139).

The last two passages Irwin cites do use the term συμφέρον or a variant, but they still do not explicitly make the contrast he suggests they do. They may, however, reasonably imply this contrast. 1168a9-12 contrasts doing a benefaction, which is *kalon*, with receiving a benefaction, which is, “if anything, advantageous (συμφέρον).” It is possible to understand this passage as contrasting what is both *kalon* and advantageous (συμφέρον) on the one hand and experiencing what is merely advantageous but not *kalon*, on the other, but this makes for a rhetorically weak contrast.

1169a3-6 contrasts desiring what is *kalon* with desiring what seems (or is held to be, δοκοῦντος) advantageous (συμφέρον, omitting the ἢ following ὀρέγεσθαι with L^b). This passage does not explicitly rule out the possibility that *to kalon* is advantageous (συμφέρον). If it were, it would be one member of the larger class of advantageous things. There would then be a technical difference between desiring what is *kalon* and whatever seems (or is held to be) personally advantageous.²⁸ However, this contrast would also be rhetorically weak.

These last two passages, when combined with the plausible claim that Aristotle intends rhetorically strong contrasts in them, are therefore Irwin’s strongest evidence that Aristotle preserves the popular understanding of *kala* actions from the *Rhetoric* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

However, there is important evidence that Irwin does not mention. First of all, Aristotle claims at the beginning of the work that he will rely upon the habitual beliefs of his audience of well brought up gentlemen (1095b2-8; compare 1179b4-19, b23-31, *Rhetoric* 1365b33-7, 1366a2-6). What is especially relevant is that he explicitly says that he will suppose their

²⁸ Michael seems to understand the contrast in this way (*Commentaria*, 504, lines 32-36). Gauthier and Jolif, on the other hand, read this passage as contrasting *to kalon* with what is in one’s interest (comment on 1169a6).

habitual understanding of what things are *kalon* (1095b4-6), “for the ‘that this is so’ (for example, that this is *kalon*) is a beginning point (ἀρχή).” (1095b6). That is to say, “that x is *kalon* according to his audience’s habitual understanding” is a beginning point for his investigation (1095b2-4)—not to be confused with an “explanatory starting point” (Bostock, *Ethics*, 219-20).²⁹ But we saw from the *Rhetoric* that, at least in Aristotle’s analysis, *kala* actions were popularly identified with actions that unselfishly benefitted others. We should therefore expect him to appeal to this understanding of *kala* actions in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. And since all or most of his audience habitually accepted this understanding, he can do so without even needing to articulate it (Tutuska “Noble,” 163).

In addition to the last two passages that Irwin mentions, Aristotle seems to appeal to the popular understanding of *kala* actions in his discussions of courage and generosity as well as in his discussion of kingship and tyranny in Book VIII. In the case of courage, he claims that the fully virtuous person’s courageous death is perhaps especially courageous, and therefore especially *kalon* (1115b20-24), precisely because he willingly gives up the “greatest goods” (the antecedent of ἐκείνων at 1117b15 is μεγίστων ἀγαθῶν at 1117b12)—including the enjoyment of a full life of virtuous activity—in order to benefit his comrades or his city in war (1117b13-15;

²⁹ Compare *Republic* 348e4-349a3. That Aristotle claims he will rely upon his audience’s habitual beliefs about what things are *kalon* is observed by Aspasius (*Commentaria*, 9, line 31- 10, line 8), Eustratius (*Commentaria*, 33, lines 4-11), Vermigli (*Commentary*, 84-86), Burnyeat (“Learning,” 71, bottom paragraph, 72, first paragraph, 74, first paragraph), Peter Simpson (“Contemporary Virtue Ethics and Aristotle,” 95, bottom paragraph, 99, first two paragraphs), and Bruell (“Practice,” 18, bottom paragraph). Curzer also holds that Aristotle relies on the “common sense” understanding of *to kalon*, but not because of this passage. Rather, he infers this from the fact that Aristotle never gives an account of *to kalon* (*Virtues*, 27, second paragraph).

compare 1168a33-35 along with Percival, *Friendship*, 123, third paragraph; *Rhetoric* 1358b38-1359a5, 1366b36-1367a3).³⁰

In the case of generosity, Aristotle claims that the generous person gives greatly and leaves less for himself since “it does not belong to the generous person to look to himself” (1120b6). But if the generous person acts for his own sake—that is to say, with an eye on his own happiness—when he performs his generous actions, then it would not be true that he “does not look to himself” (μὴ βλέπειν ἐφ' ἑαυτὸν). And since generosity, as a virtue, issues in *kala* actions, this claim implies that the *kala* actions of generous people are self-disregarding.³¹

That Aristotle would choose his discussions of courage and generosity to emphasize the selflessness that was popularly attributed to virtue and *kala* deeds is not completely surprising. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines virtue as “a capacity characterized by beneficence” (δύναμις εὐεργετική) and, on this basis, places courage and generosity among the greatest virtues (1366b3-9). Thus, his discussions of courage and generosity are fitting places to emphasize the selfless beneficence that was popularly attributed to virtue and *kala* deeds (Tutuska, “Noble,” 165, first paragraph).

³⁰ That Aristotle here depicts courageous action as self-sacrificial is also the view of Aspasius (*Commentaria*, 87, lines 17-21), Duns Scotus (*Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, 437), Grant (*Ethics*, Vol. 2, 44, introduction to chapter IX), Harry Jaffa (*Thomism and Aristotelianism*, 85-6), Gauthier and Jolif (comment on 1117b14-15, note au prix d'une telle vertu et d'un tel Bonheur!, “at the price of such virtue and such happiness!”), Christine Korsgaard (“From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action,” 222, bottom paragraph), Susan Collins (“The Moral Virtues in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” 133, second and third paragraphs, 135, first paragraph), Taylor (comment on 1117a33-b16), and Tutuska (“Noble,” 164-5).

³¹ This point is well observed by Collins (“Moral Virtues,” 136, bottom paragraph) and Tutuska (“Noble,” 165, first paragraph). Aspasius says concerning this passage that the generous person “does not look toward himself in all things, but to *to kalon*” (οὐ γὰρ πάντως εἰς αὐτὸν ἀποβλέπει ἀλλ' εἰς τὸ καλόν, *Commentaria*, 99, lines 19-20). He therefore implies that the generous person is selflessly dedicated to *to kalon*. Grant also observes the “self-forgetfulness” of the generous person (*Ethics*, Vol. 2, 60, notes 17-19).

Aristotle also appears to appeal to the popular understanding that relates virtue and *kala* actions to the selfless benefit of others in distinguishing between the “king” (βασιλεύς) and the “tyrant” (τύραννος) in Book VIII. The true king is someone who is “self-sufficient” (αὐτάρκης) in his possession of good things and, for this reason, “does not consider what is beneficial to himself, but to the ruled.” (1160b5). The tyrant, on the other hand, is the “opposite” and “pursues what is good for himself” (1160b7-8). The true king is thus distinguished from the tyrant by his selfless concern for the good of the ruled. Moreover, the tyrant is as it were a “vicious” (μοχθηρός) king (1160b10-12; compare 1168a30-1 and note ὅσω ἂν μοχθηρότερος ᾖ [“by as much as he should be more vicious”]). Aristotle thus associates the tyrant with self-interestedness and vice and the true king with the selfless benefit of others and virtue.

This additional evidence, when combined with the best of Irwin’s original evidence, makes for a strong case. I therefore agree that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle employs the popular understanding of *kala* actions that he articulates in the *Rhetoric*.³²

Kelly Rogers, on the other hand, denies that, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle “praise[s] actions for being καλόν on the grounds of their being altruistic” (“Aristotle’s Conception of Τὸ Καλόν,” 369). In addressing Rogers, it will be important to recollect the distinction between *to kalon*—the general class or character of all things that are *kalon*—and *kala* deeds—that is, actions with motivations and intentions. Rogers is correct that Aristotle does not adopt the *Rhetoric*’s presentation of *to kalon* as “selfless,” since, as she points out, there is no presentation (ibid., 362, (2)). However, in the part of the *Rhetoric* where Aristotle discusses selflessness at the greatest length, he is not speaking about *to kalon* as a whole, but

³² That, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle appeals to the popular understanding of *kala* actions as selfless is also the view of Pangle (*Friendship*, 236, note 12); consider, also, Burger, *Dialogue*, 72, first paragraph, 73, first paragraph, 175, first paragraph.

more specifically about *kala* deeds (1366b36 and note τῶν αἰρετῶν [“among the [actions] chosen”]; compare *Politics* 1333a6-11). We can therefore ask whether Aristotle adopts the *Rhetoric’s* presentation of *kala* deeds as selfless deeds.

Rogers appears to answer “no” to this question (Τὸ Καλόν, 369-371), though she is mostly concerned with *to kalon* in general as opposed to *kala* deeds. She fairly criticizes evidence offered to the contrary by Irwin in his earlier paper, “Aristotle’s Conception of Morality” (esp., *ibid.*, 364-9). However, he has since made a stronger case, which I have discussed above. Moreover, as I have also noted, there is important evidence that Irwin still overlooks and that Rogers does not address. Most importantly, she does not address the point that Aristotle claims he will take his audience’s habitual beliefs about what things are *kalon* as a beginning point for his investigation. We should therefore expect the *Nicomachean Ethics* to reflect the popular views about what things are *kalon*, such as selfless actions.

A further difficulty

I have concluded, with Irwin, that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle employs the popular understanding of *kala* actions as selfless. However, this position is not without difficulty. As Roger Crisp well points out against Irwin (“Nobility,” 238-9), Aristotle does claim in parts of the work that *kala* actions are good for those who do them (e.g., 1099a21-5, 1169a27-9). But this claim contradicts the earlier described contrast between *kala* actions and what is good or advantageous for oneself (on this point, see Colins, “Moral Virtues,” 134-6; Tutuska, “Noble,” 171-2, 174-5, 177, bottom paragraph).

Perhaps we should conclude that Aristotle is confused about whether *kala* actions are good for oneself or not. On this view, Irwin would end up championing one horn of Aristotle’s confusion—that *kala* actions are generally not good for oneself—and Crisp would end up

championing the other—that *kala* actions generally are good for oneself. However, that *kala* actions have been depicted as both generally good and generally not good for oneself seems like too obvious a problem for Aristotle to have missed. I will therefore offer a different explanation for why he speaks about *kala* actions in this contradictory way.

Aristotle's understanding of *kala* actions

To understand why Aristotle sometimes depicts *kala* actions as good for oneself and sometimes not, we must first recognize that, though in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he adopts parts of the popular understanding of *kala* actions that he articulates in the *Rhetoric*, he also makes certain additions to it.³³ Though Aristotle would probably object to my characterization of “additions.” He would probably claim that he is bringing to light a less self-conscious part of the popular understanding of *kala* actions (see *Alcibiades I* 115a4-116b1, *Laches* 192c5-d9, *Gorgias* 483a5-8). However, I wish to remain neutral on this issue. I will therefore speak of “additions” to the at least more self-conscious parts of the popular understanding.

The first addition that Aristotle makes, if indeed it is a genuine addition (consider 1168a33-4 with context), is to say that *kala* actions are done, at least by the virtuous, from an ambition to do *kala* actions, which is the effect of saying “the end of virtue is *to kalon*” (compare *Meno* 77b2-5; see Crisp, “Murdoch,” 285; Price, *Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle*, 67, bottom paragraph and what follows; Hurka, “Wrong,” 20, second and third paragraphs). This addition adds a certain complexity to the motivation for performing *kala* actions, for these actions were already understood to be actions that were accompanied by certain (unselfish) intentions or motivations (1162b36-1163a1, *Rhetoric* 1366b36-1367a6, *Eudemian Ethics*

³³ Irwin also mentions this fact, but he focuses on the difference between performing *kala* deeds out of rational calculation (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) and performing them out of non-calculating character (in the *Rhetoric*); see “Morality,” 132. I will focus on some further differences.

1249a1-3, 5-11, 12-16; Korsgaard, "From Duty," 216-18; Hurka, "Wrong," 22, first paragraph). As

Aristotle puts in the *Politics*:

Many of the deeds that seems to be servant-like are indeed *kalon* for the freeborn among the young to do, for with regard to what is *kalon* and not *kalon* the actions do not differ according to themselves but *according to the end and the "for the sake of what"* (ὡς ἐν τῷ τέλει καὶ τῷ τίνος ἕνεκεν)." (1333a6-11, my emphasis).

Aristotle thus adds, or perhaps only emphasizes, that those who attempt *kala* actions want to do *kala* actions. They aim at *kala* actions as *kala* actions (Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De Anima Libri Mantissa*, 154, lines 30-4; compare 1099a7-15, 1179b7-9). In other words, they strive to act with unselfish or "pure" motivations. This is presumably why Aristotle says that virtuous people most especially cherish their intellect or mind (voũç, 1168b34-1169a3). The possession of intelligence makes us capable of acting with certain motivations or intentions, and therefore, it seems, with specifically *kalon* ones (Kraut, *Human Good*, 128, bottom two paragraphs; Pangle, *Friendship*, 172-3; Hurka "Wrong", 22, second paragraph). I will name the phenomenon of striving to act with unselfish motivations or intentions "noble ambition." The ascribing of noble ambition to those who attempt *kala* deeds, at least out of virtue, is then Aristotle's first addition—if it is a genuine addition—to the more self-conscious understanding of these actions.

His second addition is that the core of this ambition is the belief that performing *kala* actions—that is, benefitting others with unselfish motivations or intentions—is exceptionally good for oneself (1099a21-9, 1100b30-1101a13, 1169a18-32).³⁴

³⁴ That *kala* actions are pursued as personal goods is also the view of Politis ("The Primacy of Self-Love in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," 160, first paragraph), Collins ("Moral Virtues," 133-4), Bostock (*Ethics*, 178-9), Hurka ("Wrong," 16-17), Crisp ("Murdoch," 285), and Price (*Virtue*, 68, bottom paragraph).

I can now offer the following explanation for why Aristotle sometimes depicts *kala* actions as good for oneself and sometimes not. When he contrasts *kalon* with “advantageous” (συμφέρον) or otherwise implies that *kala* actions are not good for oneself, he is speaking according to the most common understanding of these actions. He withholds his additions and lets these actions appear to his audience as they most commonly appeared. But when Aristotle deems *kala* actions to be good, as he plainly does, he speaks then according to his “sophisticated” or “philosophical” understanding of what motivates virtuous people to attempt these actions. He takes us a step beneath their most common appearance (compare Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, I.1.). This is why Aristotle says inconsistent things about *kala* actions.

To repeat, Aristotle begins by granting the popular understanding of *kala* actions as selfless attempts to benefit others. However, he adds to this understanding that such actions are actually pursued by virtuous people as great personal goods. This addition then compels him to modify a certain part of the popular understanding of *kala* actions. *Kala* actions, as actions of selfless beneficence, were popularly thought to be in tension with one’s own good. But since Aristotle believes that these actions are pursued as great personal goods, he is compelled to revise this part of popular opinion. He depicts *kala* actions as good for oneself or personally advantageous.

However, Aristotle proceeds to his philosophical revision of the at least more self-conscious part of popular opinion only gradually. He most fully unveils it near the end of the work, at IX.8, where he argues that virtuous people are the greatest “self-lovers” (φίλαυτοι) who strive after *kala* actions, even to the point of giving up their life, on the grounds that these actions constitute the greatest personal goods (Aquinas, *Commentary*, paragraph 1865; Burger, *Dialogue*, 76, first paragraph, with 176; Tutuska, “Noble,” 171-2, though see 172, first paragraph

and what follows, 177, bottom paragraph). However, he does not always assume this revision in his presentation. And when he does not, he allows *kala* actions to appear to be in tension with one's own good.³⁵

Appreciating this point will allow us to address one final challenge to the traditional interpretation. In Book I Aristotle indicates that the politically minded among his audience are concerned with bringing happiness to their political communities. He both presents the *Nicomachean Ethics* as attempting to effect a clearer vision of the goal of the political art—the happiness of the political community (1094b5-7, 10-11)—and exhorts his audience to pursue this goal: “If it (sc. “the human good”) is the same for one and for a city, it appears to be greater, at least, and more complete to achieve and preserve it for a city, for doing this for one person only is a thing that is welcomed, but doing it for nations and cities is more *kalon* and godlike.” (1094b7-10).

Some scholars conclude from these facts that Aristotle thinks it is possible for us to act for the happiness of our political communities above and beyond our own happiness (Mckerlie, “Friendship,” 87; Roche, “Alternative,” 71; Donald Morrison, “Politics as Vocation, According to Aristotle”, 223-4, 233-4). However, observe that Aristotle enjoins his audience to bring happiness to their political communities on account of this action being “more *kalon*” that bringing happiness to one person alone. Looking back from his ultimate conclusions about how virtuous people pursue *kala* actions, we can now say that he understands the politically minded among his audience to strive to bring happiness to their political communities as something that is greatly *kalon* (compare 1177b16-17), and therefore, greatly advantageous for themselves.

³⁵ This difference in perspective can be seen by comparing III.9 with IX.8, as Tutuska well observes (“Noble,” 171, bottom paragraph). See, also, Pangle, *Friendship*, 236, note 12.

We may wonder whether Aristotle's combination of the popular understanding of *kala* actions as selfless actions that benefit others with his philosophical understanding of the virtuous person's motivation as self-regarding is ultimately consistent. Are not *kala* actions, understood as selfless actions that are chosen as great personal goods, self-contradictory and impossible? Some interpreters do conclude that *kala* actions, as they are popularly understood, are for this reason impossible (Pangle, *Friendship*, 69, bottom paragraph, 175-6, though see 181-2; Burger, *Dialogue*, 73, 175-6; compare Broadie's comment on 1168a10-11).

However, this is a discussion for another place. What is important for my purposes is that it is a consequence of Aristotle's philosophical understanding of *kala* actions that he is able to maintain, as he clearly does, that virtuous people pursue these actions as great personal goods. Understood in this way, virtue and *kala* actions do not actually challenge the principle that everyone acts ultimately for the sake of their own happiness as they would otherwise appear to (Price, *Love*, 113). Irwin's insight that Aristotle employs the popular understanding of *kala* actions as "disinterested" or "unselfish" therefore does not challenge the traditional interpretation. To the contrary, it makes this interpretation richer, for it helps reveal that Aristotle is making additions to the (at least more self-conscious part of the) popular understanding of *kala* actions that resolve their apparent conflict with his explanatory starting point as well as provides us the opportunity to wonder about his justification for doing this.

Conclusion

I mentioned at the beginning that at least some scholars are motivated to reject the traditional interpretation on account of the fact that it attributes a controversial position—psychological egoism—to Aristotle. I hope to have shown, despite the recent challenges to the contrary, that the traditional interpretation was correct to do so. Of course, this does not change the fact,

which these scholars correctly point out, that the view that human beings aim ultimately at their own happiness is controversial. But if we accept that Aristotle held this controversial view—as I think we should—then the appropriate response is to seek out his justification for holding it. This has not been done, or, at any rate, it has not been done adequately.

Two things have helped hinder the search for Aristotle's justification for his controversial view that human beings act ultimately for the sake of their own happiness. The first is the view that Aristotle does not really believe that human beings act ultimately for the sake of their own happiness. The second is the view among those who accept that he does that the Ancient Greeks commonly granted this point. Aristotle therefore felt no need to attempt to justify it (see Henry Sidgwick, *Outlines of The History of Ethics*, 56; Annas, "From Nature to Happiness," 70; Bostock, *Ethics*, 228; Irwin, *Reformation*, 22). I hope that this paper has contributed toward removing both of these hindrances

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