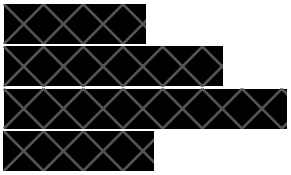

The Matter of Virtue

> "And what is well and what is badly—need we ask Lysias, or any other poet or orator, who ever wrote or will write either a political or any other work, in metre or out of metre, poet or prose writer, to teach us this?"
>
> The *Phaedrus*, Plato

> "Man is the measure of all things."
>
> Motto attributed to Protagoras

It is, I think, an uncontroversial claim that the human person ascribes value. That is, without attention to the particular nature of that value or the manner in which it is assigned, I think we find a human tendency to form judgments which ascribe to some thing a quality of being good or otherwise, such that there is an extent to which one thing, or another, can be said to be better or otherwise than another. Whether or not we find this tendency prescriptively well-motivated, and independent of whatever we believe to have caused it to arise, this tendency is a salient and general characteristic of mankind, whether or not it is particular thereto. The human person, moreover, has a tendency to seek out systems and formal theories whereby it might characterize its own behavior in general terms.

A particular study of basic questions on the nature, behavior, tendency, or essential character of a thing, the human person included, is broadly that which we term a 'philosophy'. The branch of philosophy which is concerned with this tendency to ascribe value is termed 'axiology', from Greek ἀξία, meaning "value" or "worth", and the suffix of like extraction which denotes a domain of study. Axiology, in its own right, is a fruitful domain of study, but the notion of axiology more often arises as a consequence of the observation that multiple branches of philosophy ascribe value to things in similar ways and raise similar questions about the nature and ontological situation of those judgments. In addition to a general practice of axiology in itself, there exists a class of axiological fields of study, each of which constitutes an independent branch of philosophy, related by this class of common modality in that each concerns itself with the ascription of its own particular notion of value.

Most often, this description, that of the axiological philosophy, is applied to the fields of aesthetics and ethics, respectively concerned with aesthetic and ethical value. The notion of aesthetic value is perhaps illustrative of the nature of axiological problems in general, in that it is sometimes approximated by the notion of 'beauty', but it is clear that the ascribed predicate in the adjective 'beautiful' is not wholly coherent with the spirit of aesthetic value, in that the

colloquial sense thereof tends to refer narrowly to things that are formally conventional and possess a sort of Sentimentalist appeal. Further difficulty arises in attempting to reconcile this dissonance by more precisely outlining the predicate of aesthetic value, leading to deliberation on subjects including the location of such value in the ascribing individual or in the object of ascription, et cetera. These conversations motivate the practice of the philosophy of aesthetics. Regardless of the particulars, the evaluative ascriptions of 'good' and 'bad', 'better' and 'worse' may be employed to signify relative status assigned by the modality of judgment which characterizes an axiology.

Likewise, the domain of ethics endeavors to study the ascription of ethical value. In this case, the problem of signifiers is perhaps less fraught, though I am sure contention could be encountered. An assessment of 'right action' tends to cohere with the judgment of an action as broadly axiologically good, and similarly for 'wrong action' in the sense of the bad, such that it is better to act rightly. Thus, the philosophy of ethics may be characterized as the domain which endeavors to answer a question such as "What is right?" A particular ethical theory gives rise to a particular answer with some particular extent and manner of concomitant justification, and the general practice of ethical philosophy seeks to assess these respective characterizations on various grounds. The normative project of ethical philosophy, which receives much attention, endeavors to produce stronger claims, in that it attempts to give rise to a motivated prescriptive judgment. This, then, might be an answer to the question, "What ought to be done?" This is distinct from the project of applied ethics, which endeavors to answer practical questions as to what ought to be done under particular circumstances. Instead, the normative ethical project seeks to answer broader questions as to whether, and why, a particular class of actions is generally right or wrong. Normative ethical theories might also be characterized as those philosophical theories which attempt to give rise to principles by which an action can be assessed as right or wrong—these theories certainly can be applied, and attention to the problems of application often motivates those engaged in theoretical study.

In practice, the study of normative ethics is characterized by a tripartite division into consequentialist, deontological, and virtue-ethical or 'aretaic' branches. Each of these, it is important to note, are classes of ethical theories, in that they describe groups of particular approaches which share certain distinguishing characteristics and basic notions. In contemporary ethical philosophy, the deontological approach is most established, due in large part to the impact of the work of Immanuel Kant. The virtue-ethical approach is in some sense the most historically established, in that the practice of what we now call ethical philosophy, in the specific sense of a systemic, philosophical modality of ethical study, owes its origins to specific virtue-ethical frameworks in Western antiquity, most instrumentally in Classical Greece as expounded in Aristotle's *Ethics*. More recently, in what has been termed the 'aretaic turn' of the late 20th century and thence, the virtue-ethical approach has received renewed attention. Finally, the consequentialist approach, particularly in the form of utilitarianism, has become increasingly relevant of late, a shift that commenced with significant groundwork laid during the Enlightenment and which continues to the present day. More specifically, widespread and serious

attention paid to the strictest, most general utilitarian theories appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon.

This division, as described here, frequently appears in analyses, literature reviews, and generally in all manner of comparative ethical projects. Often, some publication will endeavor to judge these theories on their respective merits by comparing the manner in which they resolve some ethical paradox or dilemma which arises from one and is assessed differently under another—and, typically, the Kantian-deontological, Aristotelian-aretaic, and utilitarian modalities are the three that, for the common ethical scholar, bear consideration. In service of explicating the nature of these three branches, the introduction of a further pair of predicates is merited, one of which is the aforementioned category of deontology, the other being the class of teleological ethics. A deontological ethics, broadly, founds itself on some set of principles or rules for ascribing judgment, such that these rules apply unconditionally and in themselves without regard for any intrinsic property understood to arise from the actions to which they apply. An example of a familiar deontological dictum from antiquity is "Thou shalt not kill". Another more modern example is the central dictum of Kantian ethics, which he terms a "categorical imperative" in the sense of a universal law, and may be stated in paraphrase as "Act only according to principles which it would be logically coherent for you, in turn, to will to become universal laws." The principles of a deontology can operate in a foundationalist or coherentist manner, as in these two examples respectively, and do vary in their subtlety, complexity, and manner of construction. However, the definitional character of a deontology is such that principles are expounded which are to be adhered to purely in themselves, whereby those actions which uphold the enumerated principles in turn constitute right action. This judgment of right action is formulated irrespective of any concern which lies without that which is assessed by the stated, canonical principles—consequently, systems of deontological ethics are often founded in either very few exceedingly general, careful logical propositions, or in a vast array of specific practical dicta, where both approaches arise in an attempt to achieve the required universality.

The other category under consideration, that of teleology, finds its ascription of value by assessment of the "ends" of an action, in the sense of the effect which it produces. This defers the judgment of rightness to a goodness intrinsic in the product of an action, which produces an ethical theory that, rather than judging action in itself, applies the principles of another axiological domain to the consequence thereof. As this language suggests, the most salient class of teleological ethics is that of consequentialism, wherein actions are judged according to the goodness of their practical consequences, and the most salient example of this class in contemporary discussion is that of utilitarianism, which judges actions by the extent to which they contribute to the production of some net, universal goodness termed 'utility'. Perhaps the purest consequentialist aphorism is "the ends justify the means." It is important to note—and it will become important, later—that the class of teleological ethics is broader than just the class of consequentialist ethics. A focus on the reason which brings about a thing—the "final cause", or *telos*, of an action—is the attitude which characterizes teleology in general. A particular form of

teleology, distinct from consequentialism, arises when things are understood to have intrinsic purpose, in the sense of a particular purpose for which and due to which they exist, which is in turn couched in terms of a natural order of things or other similar notion. In that case, actions which fulfill the *telos* or final cause of a thing constitute right action in a manner which is quite different from the contemporary, consequentialist perspective. It is also worth noting that the categories of deontology and teleology do not form a dichotomy. For example, one could posit the existence of a set of rules which, if followed, would lead to the absolute maximization of a measure of utility, such that consequently the adherence to these principles in themselves would produce utilitarian right action. Such a framework, sometimes termed a 'rule utilitarianism', is in the strictest sense an example of teleological (specifically consequentialist, specifically utilitarian) deontology.

So, in these first two popular categories, deontology and consequentialism, the axiological judgment—as to the value, or goodness, of an action—is answered straightforwardly. When we ask "What is right?" the deontologist answers that we may apply the principles of his framework to arrive at an answer—and we may arrive at a normative judgment, in the sense of what ought to be done, by assessing the comparative rightness of possible actions. The consequentialist tells us to assess the outcome of actions and then, by some modality of assessing the goodness of that outcome—which is associated with his particular consequentialist framework—we arrive at a judgment and can assess comparative rightness in the same manner. Conveniently, neither of these frameworks require a particular mode of being or interior character on the part of the applied-ethical practitioner, other than most perfect adherence to the principles, or practice of assessment, respectively outlined. As a consequence, the quality of one's adherence is easily assessed in turn, and the nature of a deviation from perfect fulfillment of ethical principles is easily understood and corrected, at least in the notional case of a completely agentic person. Moreover, interpretability of these frameworks, in the sense of the ease with which they can be communicated to persons irrespective of their ontological foundation, is very good—regardless of anthropological distinctions or degrees of personal development, these ethical theories can be characterized as a procedure, a sort of informational mechanism, and thus transmitted entirely without attention to those, again, interior attributes. This coheres with our sense of ethics as an axiology of action, in that the manner in which judgments are ascribed exists as an informational apparatus which is independent of any particular ascribing agent and is concerned only with attributes present in the nature of the action itself. To be clear, the state of the actor may be relevant to the judgment, but only to the extent that this state is construed to be a salient component of the action as judged—only in the sense that the state of the actor is considered somewhat immanent to the relevant notion of the action. Such ethical theories are wholly abstracted over the interiority of the ascribing party, and in a sense consequently do not require an ascribing party—a contemporary axiology is in some sense an independent, materialized-informational actor which operates without the intervention of its practicing adherents. This independence, I think, is what most characterizes the modern concept of an ethical framework, in the sense that a modern philosophical framework is an externalizable,

abstract informational mechanism by sole means of which one may ostensibly arrive at practical philosophical judgments in some particular domain.

Our last of the three branches, virtue or "aretaic" ethics, wholly departs from this approach. The origin of virtue ethics, along with the term 'ethics' itself, lies in the Classical period, when Aristotle formulated his *Ethics*. This series of treatises presents a structured exposition of a philosophical project begun by his immediate forebears—Plato and Socrates—and continued and refined by Aristotle himself. It is in the Classical period that the notion of 'philosophy' as a coherent and distinct branch of study, separate from other intellectual activities, was first formed. Plato outlined philosophy[1] as a structured practice of intellectual investigation, governed by principles intended to facilitate the effective pursuit of both practical and theoretical truths. This was in direct opposition to the preeminent intellectuals of the time, the sophists[2], who employed a loosely-organized rhetoric-oriented approach in their role as professional orators and educators in Athens. Socrates, and his student Plato, rebelled against the sophist approach to discourse, which they saw as fatally blinded and confused by its focus on persuasion through casuistic sleight-of-hand. The sophists prided themselves on the ability to demonstrate any proposition, no matter how fallacious or absurd, by sheer skill and artifice—a situation that was clearly incompatible with the pursuit of particular wisdom or truth. Otherwise, the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, in the strictest sense of those dedicated to the pursuit of reasoned explanation, were primarily concerned with mathematics and highly general metaphysical questions. In departure from these prevailing intellectual conditions, Socrates sought to rigorously consider practical dilemmas and, with his student Plato and Plato's student Aristotle, there followed a continual increase in the degree of serious, principled attention paid to applied concerns. With Aristotle in particular, this new breadth of focus led in a particularly influential direction: he commenced the study of natural philosophy, that is to say, a structured, empirical investigation of the principles of matters such as botany, geology, or optics. Aristotle produced his various frameworks of natural understanding by a consistent process wherein he sought to extract invariant principles or laws, determined through inductive reasoning, from accumulated observational experience. To draw further conclusions, he employed the techniques of deductive reasoning which he outlined in his earlier treatises on logic. In this manner, he wrote on diverse natural topics, and furthermore on matters such as metaphysics, ethics, and politics—all of which were inseparably related as components of his overarching project, the pursuit of a holistic comprehension of the world.

Aristotle's extensive body of work can be divided into three broad categories: the theoretical, the natural, and the practical. Theoretical philosophy, for Aristotle, included fields such as logic and metaphysics. Natural philosophy included biology, astronomy, and so forth—though grounded in inductive, inferential study rather than anything akin to contemporary empiricism. While the modern scientist seeks to arrive at a model by which the behavior of a physical system can be predicted, Aristotle sought to apprehend the behavior and action of

[1] Etymology φιλοσοφία, *philosophia*, or love of wisdom.
[2] Not in the contemporary sense. Etymology σοφιστής, *sophistes*, a person possessed of particular wisdom.

natural phenomena in a manner that was essentially qualitative. This is in no sense a concession to practicality, nor is it some manner of capitulation in the face of a notion that true knowledge is impossible, or that greater deductive precision is impractical. Rather, the nature of Aristotle's theory reflects the fullest pursuit of priorities which are meaningfully distinct from those which guide contemporary scientific investigation, in that his epistemics are avowedly inferential and inductive, because he foundationally privileges the authority and value of human reason. Reason, in this sense, refers merely to the very tendency and capacity of man to seek understanding, rather than a particular approach thereto—by reason I do not mean rationality. Consequently, instead of representing the world by a predictive model, Aristotle seeks to explain the world directly, in order to achieve an intimate personal comprehension of the nature thereof. The qualitative universal principles at which an Aristotelian arrives at are nothing more than a consequence of his attempt at refining and developing, without radical departure, the practice of common reasoning in which all men naturally and necessarily engage. In this sense, all that distinguishes the wise Aristotelian from the naïve shepherd is a particular state of being in which the basic instinct toward explanation and comprehension is guided, honed, and focused.

Aristotle's objective, consistent with the etymological sense of the term 'philosophy' as the love of wisdom, was to obtain practical understanding. That is to say, he sought to obtain knowledge of the world, in the form of a highly developed intuitive wisdom. This wisdom, refined and structured by intellectual comprehension, is a particular and persistent mode of being wherein one exists in apprehension of the world and its function. Rather than constructing procedures—as in a modern philosophical framework—by sole virtue of which conclusions about the world could be obtained, Aristotle sought to provide groundwork for the pursuit of an internalized understanding of the principles that govern the world, which principles he understood as possessed of a prior existence, independent of the philosophical practitioner. The role of the Aristotelian philosophical practitioner, thus, is to become a person possessed of this wisdom, and to advance the modality of its acquisition—the practice of philosophy—both in constitution and application. Note that this is not a purely pragmatic project—it seeks to arrive at metaphysically and epistemically well-founded truths—but it is also no mere intellectual exercise, in that the state of wisdom which is its foundational aspiration is distinguished from pure knowledge—such wisdom is particular to a certain practical state of being. That is, philosophy in the Classical sense is not merely something which one does. A philosopher is something which one is—a person who cultivates and pursues the basic desire to apprehend or understand the world and its function—and philosophy is the pursuit of that fulfillment, it is the pursuit of a truthful and complete apprehension of what is.

To this end, Aristotle's theoretical treatises on metaphysics and logic provide the groundwork for his further studies, which take the form of similarly structured analysis of the natural world. This study of the natural world, including its various inhabitants, gives rise to conclusions in the form of natural principles or laws, and it is these foundational inferences on which, in similar fashion to their own dependence on his metaphysical and logical theory, Aristotle's practical work then rests. The breadth of Aristotelian natural philosophy, so termed, is

greater than that which might be assumed in light of the contemporary distinction between the natural and human worlds, a distinction which is in this case anachronistic. Natural philosophy, for Aristotle, included the study of human behavior, aspects of human experience, and the mechanics of self. From these assembled theoretical and natural foundations Aristotle then composed practical treatises on diverse subjects such as politics, economics, the arts, and, of course, ethics.

The philosophical project Aristotle outlines and pursues in his *Ethics*[3] is his attempt to provide a normative interior account of how man should best live. To this end, it draws on the principles arrived at in his studies of theoretical and natural matters, and employs the same approach to structured philosophical practice also used therein. As a practical branch of Aristotle's project, his account of ethics attempts to aid in the inculcation of a personal comprehension of goodness—rather than providing a system by which particular judgments can be formed irrespective of the state of the practitioner. Just as the Aristotelian seeks a state of interior philosophical wisdom in the general case—as opposed to an exposition of particular, self-contained abstract conclusions—the project of Aristotelian ethics seeks a state of interior, phenomenological understanding of what constitutes goodness, in one's own life. Right action is understood as a mere consequence of this particular state, a consequence which does not refer without the possession of that state on the part of the actor. That is, the state of goodness is the object of axiological judgment, rather than particular action, and any action consequent to that state is subordinately good, and only good, by virtue of its origin in that state of good character. This particular state is that of the virtuous person, hence the appellation of 'virtue ethics'. The Classical ethics, then, is applicable only to an individual's own cultivation of himself or a particular other, such as his student. At the social scale of normative judgment, the concept of personal character of course fails to refer, and, consequently, Aristotle understood such matters to be a wholly different domain. This other project on the subject of right action—that of human goodness *en masse*—was, for Aristotle, instead the province of the distinct field of politics[4]. Most concisely, then, the Aristotelian ethics is a practical philosophy which seeks to structure and guide the achievement of personal virtue, or good character.

In ancient Athens, the term *arete* was used to describe a broadly applicable notion of goodness which dominated folk axiology. This goodness was couched in terms of the inherent purpose or function of a thing, and that thing was understood to possess a goodness commensurate with the extent to which it both possessed excellent capacity to fulfill that function and fully exercised that capacity. This purpose was understood to be the very reason for which a thing was brought into being, and all things had such a purpose, particular to and inherent to the thing. Aristotle, in attempting to elucidate and structure the intuitive answer to questions of "why?" on the matter of the existence of a thing[5], arrived at a formulation of the

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[3] Etymology ἠθικός, *ethikos*, of or pertaining to character or personal nature

[4] The study of the *polis*, the city-state.

[5] A project which, for him, fell under the natural philosophy of physics. This is another term coined by Aristotle, in this case to refer to the study of natural causes—the principles and laws which bring about particular objects and motions.

notion of *telos*—the *telos* of a thing is the reason for its being, that very cause of which the thing is an effect. Consequently, having brought a thing into being, that *telos* of a thing is the very purpose which it must excellently fulfill in order to be possessed of *arete*, of virtue.

Material objects can certainly be ascribed *arete*. To illustrate the way in which *arete* corresponds with the object as effect of a particular cause, consider a particularly excellent sword. An arming-sword which is excellent might be possessed of good balance, robustness, and a keen edge. It is intuitive, I hope, that these characteristics are—with regard to the particulars of a sword—constitutive of goodness. The reasonable Classical man would confirm that this sword is possessed of *arete*, in that it is fit for its purpose and serves it excellently. Aristotle would, to aid us in understanding the principle which gives rise to this axiological judgment, note that the *telos* or final cause of the sword is the taking of lives. The purpose for which the sword is fit, and to which fitness its possession of *arete* is owed, is that very *telos*. Now, this is its final cause because the reason which gives rise to the sword—on account of which the sword is created—is that killing. It is an instrument to that end, and its entrance into the world is owed to and motivated by—is an effect of—its final cause. Were this arming-sword, instead, to be an ornamental dress-sword—understood as brought into being to that end—then a functionally excellent sword would not be possessed of *arete*, as a consequence of its being a different thing and consequently possessed of a different *telos*. Instead, such a sword ought to be of refined beauty, perhaps, and impart dignity to its bearer. Aristotle, in some cases, investigates the *telos* of a thing further by an analytic sort of decomposition, wherein he would note that the *telos* of the ceremonial weapon has subordinate components in the end of aesthetic value, in the end of imparted dignity, et cetera.

This account of the notion of *telos* might suggest that a plausible account of a creative intent is required to comprehend the purpose of a thing. This is incorrect. Natural objects were understood by Aristotle to possess *telos* to the same extent. In order to understand this, care must be taken with the crucial distinction between a creative motivation and the cause which effects a thing's being. The notion of *arete* is a folk concept of goodness, not particular to a philosophical practice, and the good Aristotelian creates no superfluous or particularly philosophical notions. The notion of the *telos* of a thing attempts to give structure to an intuitive answer to the question, "Why does this exist? To what end?" In the case of a work of human artifice, its cause might be sought on the grounds that a human is the actor which brought about the being of the thing, and one plausible notion of its cause is therefore simply their human motivation in doing so. However, when one departs from the circumstances in which ascertaining this particular answer is possible—when no contact with that human creative force is possible, when no theory of mind can be obtained—one must arrive at a notion of *telos* in the proper sense, by a basic inference as to the purpose of a thing. If one encounters a loose sword, free of context, and proceeds to formulate an axiological judgment, then one must begin with a notion of the ends to which that value is in service. The sword is, at first blush, a sword. If not recognizable as such, it is probably of a particularly poor sort. The excellent arming-sword, when encountered freely, will still be a weapon of *arete*, but it is nevertheless an ornament of little virtue.

This vagueness encountered in the notion of *telos* is due precisely to its explanatory nature. It does not strive for universality, because the objective is to elucidate and structure an intuition—hence, universality is simply an orthogonal concern. Were the intuition to be rightly universal, then this explanatory approach would reflect that. While the notion of *telos* itself falls under the project of Aristotelian physics, investigation of the *telos* of a particular thing is a concern of natural philosophy, and the particular conclusion at which one arrives is a judgment arrived at by practical wisdom rather than explicit, abstract law. It is worth noting that this is not in any way an advancement of a relativist or subjectivist attitude. There is a normative axiology of good and bad philosophy, which is concerned with the extent to which the philosopher fulfills his *telos* of arriving at knowledge, in the sense of good judgment, knowledge, and truth. Like any other thing, philosophy has its *telos*, which we've already discussed in passing—the cause which brings about philosophy is the definitional love for wisdom which motivates its adherents, and the fulfillment of that cause in the achievement of the pursuant state is the corresponding end. The philosopher possessed of *arete* is effective toward these ends. While this efficacy is, necessarily, not open to sound assessment by some purely abstract mechanism, it is certainly not arbitrary or a matter of relative determination. Greater or lesser virtue is possessed by a thing, a firm axiological judgment may be arrived at through good comprehension, and the matter of adequacy in the practice of the discipline itself is no different.

When there is meaningful distinction in the ontologies of two practitioners of an explanatory philosophy, their determinations can, when taken in conjunction, fail to cohere—they endeavor to explain two different things, which they mistakenly conflate. However, this is a general result. In contact between meaningfully different ontologies, there arises a genuine incommunicability of even the most basic ideas which implicate in any way the interior character of an ontology or its occupants. This failure is such that the activity of explanatory philosophical discourse becomes impossible, as statements which relate to the interior domain with which it is concerned cease to be well-formed. To communicate at all on any subject then necessitates that each referent employed be vacated, that it be dissociated from its particular content and thus cease to refer to or describe the condition of life or being at all. This gives rise to a language of mere appearances, in which only empirical and abstract statements, in the narrowest sense, can be made at all. This state of ontological confusion, of fracture and empty speech, is the prevalent condition in much of today's world. Further exploration of this condition, the dire circumstances of which prevent the practice of any philosophy other than that of mere abstraction—that is, in the sense of a modern philosophical framework—is outside the scope of this essay. However, it is important to keep in mind that a coherent and consistent ontological condition is presupposed by the Aristotelian approach, and that this coherence was an actual fact of the circumstances under which this discipline was first practiced, and that, consequently, this coherence can be meaningfully achieved.

The Aristotelian approach is often criticized on related grounds, in that it limits itself to comprehension of the practitioner's particular reality. However, this is—importantly—the only reality the practitioner can meaningfully understand. A project that attempts to do otherwise, to

ontologically universalize, or to become independent of ontology, must fail. It may fatally misconstrue the other by false correspondence or erroneous generalization, or it may lead, implicitly or explicitly, with or without participants' awareness, to its internal ontological language being, often destructively, enforced on all its practitioners. Most frequently, it will simply dispense with direct reference altogether, stripping itself of any connection to the particulars of reality and occupying a realm of ideals. This is by and large the situation in contemporary philosophy, and it is catastrophic, because it obviates the possibility of real practical work or development in the interior regime—that being all of phenomenology and experience.

Philosophy thus completely ceases to cohere with or fulfill its proper motivation, that being comprehension of the world—the world in which one lives—and the personal achievement of a state of good wisdom. This ontological vacancy also constitutes a serious failure purely on grounds of its lack of reference, in that it produces by necessity a terrible alienation of description from subject. This leads to confusion of a model, divorced from its subject, with an understanding of the subject itself. Such an understanding, however, can only be properly arrived at through experience. Only an inhabitant of an ontology can experience the same, only such an inhabitant can understand it, and when this decoupling occurs the philosopher is wont to take their model as true explanation. The philosopher then takes the dissonance which necessarily results as motivation for further artifice, and in doing so exacerbates the catastrophe. In the worst case, which is all too common, the practitioner is not simply deprived of the opportunity for wisdom, good living, and meaning—a condition which is already the apex of horror in itself—but the abstract regime actually supplants their own internal experience and they live a life variously constituted of mere ideals and experientially vacant associations and deductions.

To understand the terror of this condition, one requires an experiential familiarity with the interiority absent therein, as well as an ability to characterize and interpret that state and a grasp of the paramount importance of it, in the sense that it is precisely the constitution of the reality in which one lives. Firmly and cogently motivating this concern is a broader project, but it is far too important—and too fundamental to my own motivation in this area—to be entirely omitted or ignored. I find it especially important to give this practical account now that I have provided the reader with the broadest essentials of a foundation which can be employed in reacting productively to these affairs, rather than simply assuming a posture of acceptance or despair.

The ideas discussed herein provide a practice by which this desperate state—the perniciousness of which really cannot be overstated—can be avoided. The harmful incoherence, the unreality, which arises from particular universalizing attitudes, is highly interrelated with other aspects of a vast, penetrating, near-totalizing apparatus of coevolutionary informational processes which cause the propagation and perpetuation of a mode of being wherein most persons are deprived of the possibility of human life itself, aside from the mere survival of the body and the subjection of the mind to base sensory experience, which is no life at all. This condition has, as well, incomparably dire consequences for the practical, material circumstances of man. This great commingled phenomenon, which is identifiable in terms of its highly

consistent operating principles and its occupation of a particular niche in the informational ecology of the contemporary world, transforms life into a phantasm of mere appearances and sensations, while the world and its inhabitants undergo insidious decay as a consequence of a loss of the interior motivation which would otherwise guide them to right action and toward excellence within and without. This thing, which in a sense is best described as an informational parasite, has subsumed our natural defense mechanisms against such self-destruction. Those defense mechanisms take the form of the precise sort of interior and experientially cultivated good sense with which Aristotle concerned himself. Providing the ability, in the sense of practical philosophy, to identify and combat the manifest tendencies and informational apparatus which arise from or instantiate this overarching tendency—practically, providing the ability to understand this parasite as a thing in itself, to conceive of it and understand it and its action, to combat it—is a greater project than is undertaken here. However, at this juncture the Classical project toward wisdom and the good life is most certainly still an adequate practice through which one can recover for oneself and further pursue the proper condition of human being—first in order to live at all, and then in order to live a good life as best one can under the conditions of an abominably diseased world. Such a life is, still, eminently worth living.

Now that this warning and exhortation is concluded, we return to the matter of the interior objectivity of Aristotelian philosophy, which extends to conclusions on the matter of natural things and their associated principles as well. Intuition is given pride of place, but must be cultivated such that good intuition, or wisdom, is possessed—and each particular project of philosophy aids in this endeavor as applies to its respective concerns. Generally, when assessing the virtue of a thing, our substantive conclusions are drawn based on our notion of the *telos* to which a thing is most suited—this is the same as the process, uncontentious I hope, by which we arrive at conclusions as to what something is, in the basic sense of its membership in a class of objects. Membership of a class is a statement on the nature of a thing, and that nature corresponds with the ends consequent to and in service of which it exists. The sword is certainly a sword, and at that rate a good one—it is good at being a sword. We would not be inclined to take it more strictly to be another thing, an ornamental sword, as there is no indication to that effect. If it were apparently ornamental, then we would take it on those merits, and assess it by that end, and ascribe it that particular purpose. A railway spike is a poor chair indeed, but it would never be assessed as such unless one were to frivolously employ it to that end. There is something clearly unnatural in employing it as a chair, given that it is poorly suited to that expedient—we find it unnatural to term it a chair at all. There is, then, a direct natural correspondence between character or category of being, in the sense that is what in particular something is, and the *telos* of that thing. The explanation for a thing's existence and its suitability for the natural purpose implied by that existence are respectively unified in the—again explanatory—notion of *telos* and the prior, basic intuitive notion of *arete* which it explains.

Returning to the subject of natural objects, our determination of the sword's value on grounds of its efficacy in being a sword is illustrative. Consider, for example, the grain of wheat. What is it, then, to be a good grain of wheat? We might ask that it be of good savor, not be

blighted or rotted, we might wish it to adequately fulfill its role in the grinding of flour and baking of bread. To this end, we might assert that the purpose, the *telos* of the grain is the bread loaf, in that the grain is brought about or motivated by the manner in which it is employed. However, this is a bit strange. Wheat exists independent of man, and does not rely on man to bring it about or conceive of it. This *telos* of bread, while certainly a sound explanation of a particular axiological judgment, leads us to the ascription only of a notion of virtue which is incoherently particular. We might be inclined to rest our case and state that, as wheat was not brought into being by intent, it and other things have no meaning aside from their relationship to a human person. However, this is unsatisfying and fails to answer the question which physics first poses—why does the grain come about? Proceeding from this problem gives rise to a satisfactory answer: the grain comes about as an effect of the wheat which sprouts from it, in that the process of propagation of this life-form necessitates the grain, and in this it finds its purpose. Specifically, the very existence of the descendant plant implies in turn, or causes to come about, the existence and particular function of the grain. Thus, the *telos* of the grain is the sprouting wheat plant, and a good grain is that which most excellently germinates and gives rise to a hardy plant which further perpetuates its line. Then, a seed which possesses some unique heritable character which gives rise to wheat of greater vitality and fitness is a better seed, possessed of greater *arete*. This is coherent, and satisfying in the broadest sense of wheat, irrespective of particular conditions or relationships to other classes of entities. This is, in fact, how Aristotle resolves this particular question on the subject of the seed of a plant, which he uses similarly as a demonstrative example.

Now, then, we can proceed to the *arete* or virtue of man, and consequently arrive at the *telos* of man. Aristotle's approach to ethics, as mentioned earlier, employs his general principles of philosophy in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature and principles of a virtuous state of being, such that the associated state of particular wisdom which gives rise thereto may be personally achieved. The general, substantive axiology of *arete* which we have employed thus far is no less applicable to this problem, and, in structuring our investigation of the nature of human virtue—the character of a man possessed of *arete*—we may proceed similarly, by endeavoring to ascertain the particular human *telos*. Man’s *telos*, his inherent purpose, is, I think, in some sense a satisfactory concept of the meaning of life, in that this particular approach to the question of meaning gives an answer that is both definitionally the very reason for one’s being and, moreover, definitionally the very same end which any virtuous man pursues. More properly, perhaps, it is the purpose of life—from which point the personal derivation of meaning is, I think, substantially easier to motivate than otherwise. Regardless, what is this *telos*?

In order to motivate a plausible conclusion, let us first begin with one that is flawed. Presume that the *telos* of man is the good or welfare of the state. In a similar fashion to the manner, noted earlier, in which the relationship of man to wheat must not be necessary to give sense to the existence of wheat, there is a corresponding sense in which the existence of the state, or even other men at all, is not intrinsic to the being of man in himself, and therefore should not be implicated in an attempt to ascertain the reason for his existence. Consequently, our notion of

man's purpose should be interior and particular to man in himself and, while only most achievable to an extent commensurate with circumstance, it should always be well-formed and possible presuming a basic extent of negative liberties—this captures the need for ontological independence which arises when considering the matter of the wheat. Moreover, the notion at which we arrive must of course cohere when judged against our basic practical axiology, that is to say, it should agree with our intuitive sense of the nature of a good man, which is what we are attempting to more precisely elucidate.

Now that we've attained further clarity as to the requirement of ontological independence, we can proceed with another helpful attitude on the *telos* of a thing. To arrive at an understanding of the purpose of a thing in subtler cases, it is helpful to instead consider the natural action of a thing on the world. That is, to arrive at the *telos* of the sword, instead of attempting to directly conceive of the purpose of the sword, or the cause of its being, or the nature of a good sword—that is, the appropriate notion of *arete* as applies to the sword—instead, we may begin with inference as to what the proper, sensible action or effect of a sword is upon other things, upon the world. This yields the same conclusion—the proper or appropriate action of a sword is the taking of lives, in the sense that a sword is understood in terms of its relation to that action, and consequently its *arete* is commensurate with its degree of excellence to that end. We understand *arete*, then as an excellence in the capacity to perform appropriate action or function, in the sense of action that is merely expected as a consequence of the nature of a thing, rather than more normatively proper, though these notions cohere. It is right for a sword to be a suitable instrument for the natural action of a sword, which action is its *telos*, and which action consists of the exercise of that capacity with which assessment of its *arete* is concerned. This is the nature of the explanatory project, in that these notions which guide our investigation correspond exactly with the common, sensible, or natural prior, from which they directly arise. Again, according to the attitude which this concept of appropriate action yields, the axiological judgment is obtained according to the extent to which a thing possesses capacity to that particular action, and the *telos* or appropriate consummation of a thing's being, the purpose of that thing, is the fullest exercise of that capacity.

On the matter of man, we might consider the suitability of a man for a particular purpose—the excellent bladesmith, then, is he who crafts the most excellent blades. Then, the *arete* of man is commensurate with the *arete* of the proceeds of his action on the world. However, this is both particular to an activity and its proceeds, and also fails to refer—the good bladesmith is not necessarily a good man, and it is the nature of the good man which we endeavor to understand. One might seek to determine the activity, then, which coheres in a more general sense with goodness, such that one arrives at an action which is the practice of goodness in itself. That is to say, a practice which is not simply that which gives rise to good action, but rather that which gives rise to the good man—and thus coheres inferentially with man's goodness. In doing so, one might arrive at particular principles, where by the execution of such principles the activity of goodness may be best performed. Then, we say, the inherent function of man is the practice of this goodness, and this goodness is that which gives rise to man. This

natural action of man on the world will be achieved pursuant to his fitness for this purpose of goodness, that is, pursuant to his degree of excellence in those abilities which are implicated in the practice of goodness. Notice that this degree of excellent fitness for purpose is the very same as the notion of *arete*, which is the axiology by which we ascribe goodness at all. To be possessed of *arete* is to be good—to possess the character of goodness—and thus the implicated abilities, which are involved in the action of goodness, are simply this same character of goodness. The practice of goodness, by which greater ability to goodness—greater goodness—is attained, is then necessarily the very cultivation of *arete*, which is in turn that very ability to pursue the practice of goodness—which is, again, the cultivation of *arete*.

This cycle resolves beautifully in the observation that man can act to bring about a particular condition in himself—that is, that the notion of a practice is possible at all—which is what makes this argument particular to man. To achieve this resolution, we may consider the associated *telos* present in this notion of *arete*, of virtue. The *telos* which arises from this argument, as with any other, corresponds with the fullest exercise of the capacities which are described by the associated notion of *arete*. This concept of virtue at which we have arrived is, in turn, the very capacity to cultivate virtue—that is, our notion of man's fitness for purpose is, in turn, that of his fitness for the purpose of arriving at fitness for that selfsame purpose in himself. Consequently, man's end is virtue, enacted in himself, where virtue is that very character which, when possessed, produces the cultivation of virtue in oneself. Man is brought about by virtue, and his natural purpose is the achievement of a state of virtue, of *arete*. If this notion of virtue were to be specific, were it to be simply skill in blacksmithing or great strength or lovingkindness, then we would arrive at an implied conclusion that, for example, skill in bladesmithing is that very activity which has as its particular *telos* or natural proceeds the possession of further skill in bladesmithing. This is clearly false—the *telos* of the bladesmith is the particular proceeds of the work of bladesmithing, that is, the *telos* is the edged weapon itself. However, one might well note that there is a sense, though not principal or particular to the activity in itself, in which the bladesmith does produce greater skill in bladesmithing by virtue of his activity. This is the nature, which is possessed by any activity, of that activity as a form of practice or exercise—as personal cultivation—in the sense which an activity can be conceived of, and engaged in, as a manner of bringing about a particular condition in oneself.

As the notion of virtue which coheres with our investigation thus far cannot be in the practice of a specific activity which has as its end some *telos* other than itself, we arrive at the satisfactory activity—practice itself, or self-cultivation, which is the general activity which has itself as its *telos*. Any form of practice, taken merely as practice rather than a particular activity with other particular ends, produces greater efficacy in the exercise of further practice of any sort, a general efficacy in the form of a coherence of volition and being, which might be termed discipline, or agency, but is perhaps more generally described as command over oneself in that it consists not of effortful incitement of self to action, but rather of a general condition of being wherein one's particular condition is most efficaciously a direct product of one's will. The practice of a physical activity is, to be clear, no less coherent with this notion—in obtaining

greater strength or dexterity one enhances the ease and efficacy with which a particular physical condition or motion arises from one's will. In light of this observation on the matter of practice—a general apprehension of practice as that by which man causes his particular being—the *telos* of man is himself, which is natural since, as we have already observed, man brings about himself, and the proper cause which gives rise to man is thus simply he himself, in his continued existence. Consequently, the particular activity with which the *arete* of man is concerned is that of bringing about himself, and a greater efficacy in doing so, an excellence which is the standard of *arete* on the matter of man, corresponds with a greater ability to be the cause which effects a particular state in oneself. The aforementioned self-reinforcing character of agency or, more precisely, self-determination, is this very ability—the essential nature of practice is the activity of bringing about a condition in oneself, and the coherent object of practice itself, in the general sense, is a greater ability to do so. The Classical philosopher uses the term *hexis* to refer to such a persistent condition or disposition, inculcated by practice such that it becomes an inherent property of one's being. One's temperament is as much *hexis* as is a particular practical skill, and the condition of *arete* is itself a form of *hexis*—it is the condition of a man whose disposition gives him excellent command over the same, such that his manner of being is most fully self-determined, such that he is most wholly caused by his own self. The virtuous man, then, is the man who brings himself about in an excellently self-determined manner commensurate with his potential to do so—he realizes and exercises his faculties fully in this sense. Man's very existence, in itself—his endeavor of being—is his own *telos*. Living life most fully, in greatest accord with the cultivation and utilization of one's capacities, is man's purpose. This, then, is an explanation of the essential notion which underlies our natural conception of good character or conduct, and of the nature of the good man in which it rests.

We have arrived at an explanation of the particular nature of human virtue by a process of deduction, in which the notion of virtue is the fixed-point of a logical recurse generated by the notion of *arete*, considered together with the question of what particular practice or activity is the province of the virtuous man, and in light of man's ability to bring about his own nature. This differs from the argument Aristotle employs to arrive at his own notion of man's particular *telos*. He identifies and describes particular virtues, and observes that those virtues tend toward a general practical cultivation of potentiality and the exercise thereof. However, he fails to convincingly motivate a specific, identifiable notion to explain and unify the broad normative nature of human goodness in all of its particular forms. He does argue that a particular philosophical sort of reasoned activity is the highest form of virtue, because it is, according to him, in some unique sense particular to the human organism, but this so-called 'function argument' arises from inferential conclusions which are somewhat more contentious and, as we have demonstrated, not at all necessary. Moreover, rather than arguing that any normatively good life reflects a state of reasoned comprehension, which could charitably be taken to cohere with our notion of self-determination and with the actual axiological notion which he ostensibly seeks to describe, Aristotle instead asserts that the philosophical life of contemplation and speculation is meaningfully superior as a consequence of its adherence to man's particular function. This is

an account of a specific notion of highest virtue, but it does not endeavor to draw together the various attributes and conditions of self which are otherwise uncontroversially understood to constitute virtue and good life. Consequently, Aristotle departs from his explanatory project and moreover fails to provide a unifying explanation of how the normative judgment of *arete* is applied with regard to the particular good of man—he fails to explain the nature of virtue.

On this matter, the notion of self-determination provides a successful account. It is well-founded in deduction from sensible inferences, and it certainly refers. *Arete*, especially as it applied to man, was understood to be a sort of heroic living in which one adequately develops and fulfills their potential. This is precisely the notion at which we arrive, and conventional virtues, such as Aristotle's four cardinal virtues—practical wisdom, self-control or moderation, courage, and justice—follow from a natural understanding of the further particular, specific motives which man possesses. These virtues are achieved when man's condition arises most freely from those motives which he intrinsically possesses. It is important to note that these virtues must arise from this condition to be contentful at all—they are virtuous, or good, or natural only because they are properties of the efficacious man. One who practices these exterior qualities out of a sense of obligation, or in order to satisfy an end other than their own *telos*, does so in a way that fails to refer to the condition of full being which they otherwise properly represent. Such a person is vacant and fails to achieve the fulfillment and richness of experience which characterizes the truly virtuous person. Such a person will tend to behave in an incoherent and contradictory manner that is consistent with the dissonance on which his actions rest.

The contemporary, modern ethical theories have their origin in a basic understanding of goodness—we hold them, at the very least, to a basic standard of reference and coherence with intuition. However, as mentioned earlier, the connection to that interior foundation, in the form of the all-important explanatory relationship thereto, has been lost in the modern approach to ethics. The modern ethical theory endeavors to give rise to an abstract framework that rests on coherentist or foundationalist notions, rather than the inferential justification which is necessary to give a philosophy actual practical content. That is to say, a philosophy which lacks inferential foundations has been severed from direct correspondence with reality. Consequently, the popular comparison between the three ostensible branches of ethical understanding is erroneous. A category mistake is made in doing so, in that the judgments which are formed in making such comparisons—independent of any particular ethical approach—arise from our intuition on the natural qualities of good living. This intuition is already the direct object of investigation for one, and only one, of these ethical approaches. In critiquing the judgments of a deontological or consequentialist theory, when that critique is framed in a way that lacks the explicit character of a particular formal ethics, what is being done is a basic human practice wherein rightness is assessed. This practice exists independent of and prior to any particular framework, but the practice of ethical philosophy in the Classical sense endeavors to explain, elucidate, and guide it, while contemporary ethics at best enters into a semantic relationship of representation, and at worst departs therefrom into mere simulation. Consequently, in the process of formulating these comparisons, one is in some sense formulating virtue-ethical judgments, in the sense that it is the

basic tendency which virtue ethics endeavors to explain that is employed—only without the aid of the structured understanding that virtue ethics provides.

Thus, when dissonance arises, the virtue-ethical approach—if conducted successfully—will cohere, while any other approach will cohere only to the extent that it accurately simulates or represents what is already understood by the aretaic ethical philosopher. More specifically, without a grasp of the notion of *telos*, as it corresponds with the normative ascription of virtue, goodness, or *arete*, any ethical framework fails to refer. The sense in which our natural ethical judgments are formed, the basic axiology thereof, is teleological. Judgments are formed according to the extent to which something coheres with what we understand to be its nature, and this sense of a natural law or principle which gives rise to judgment must answer a justifying question posed in terms of a motivating reason for the condition or behavior of a thing. That motivating reason, the answer to a question of "why?" takes the form of an explanation which answers the teleological question—"For what purpose? To what end?" Only inferential attention to the world—which exists irrespective of the particular activity of the philosopher—can aid in seriously resolving such questions. In the real world, humans form judgments without regard for the mechanistic action of mere rootless information. Consequently, only in such an attentive manner can ethics be done.

Faced with the condition of a field, once motivated by the pursuit of practical understanding, which has been severed from its most fundamental constructs, one might be inclined to despair. However, the very independence and interiority of human life which makes it inaccessible to mere abstraction is a great consolation, in that no effort on the part of the philosopher can fully eliminate the fundamental constituents of the human condition, and as such the Classical approach continues to refer. Aside from the overarching project of unparalleled importance, mentioned earlier, in service of which the inculcation of virtue-ethical wisdom is a basic expedient, there is also ample opportunity to make extant implicitly virtue-ethical critiques of modern ethics more explicit. Contemporary literature in the philosophy of ethics includes some aretaic practice, and even some explicit awareness of the referential failure and resultant inconsistency which plagues the field. Much of the salient critique of modern ethical theory which has been written, though—some of which is exceedingly incisive and worthwhile—is couched in terms that, while normatively coherent, are not as clearly or urgently stated as they could be. To this end, one can employ the virtue-ethical terminology in restating those concerns. For example, a particular paper in ethical theory observes that a most deontologically perfect man lives a life which is in some sense unnatural or vacant, a life that we would neither desire for ourselves nor for our neighbor. That sense of an incoherence with basic desire, and the concomitant judgment this paper makes—that authentic motivation is important to a notion of good living—arise straightforwardly from the virtue-ethical ideas outlined herein, in particular the motivation it provides for the notion that an authentic experience of motivation is necessary for virtue. Without the framework of virtue ethics, it is still clear that this critique refers, that it is a sound and relevant critique. However, it is difficult to explain why it arises, or motivate it in more general terms, or give rise to a principle, such as the notion of *telos*, by which the

wrongness of the criticized theory can be understood. The virtue-ethical perspective provides a philosophical instrument by which these and similar difficulties may be alleviated.

In order to more effectively conduct the project of ethical philosophy—to return to it a degree of practical effectiveness—a restoration of virtue-ethical ideas is in order. I do not suggest any utopian absurdities, such as that the prevailing intellectual environment would be at all receptive to such an endeavor. The same incentives which shaped the practice of the sophists, and the very same characteristics of their approach to which Socrates and his intellectual descendents responded with revulsion, can, I think, both be illustratively associated with the present situation. However, while isolation and rejection are certainly adverse circumstances, the achievement of virtue, of fulfillment—the living of a good life—is possible even in opposition to prevailing conditions, as our Classical forebears themselves demonstrated. Placing a particular, unitary notion of general human *telos* on firmer ground—for example—is precisely the sort of practical endeavor which one can undertake. Such investigation helps refine the path to comprehending right action which ethical philosophy provides, and doing so is a practice by which one develops toward that same *telos*. The notion of virtue-ethical self-determination presented here—again, for example—can be fruitfully applied in discourse with other similarly committed philosophers and, more importantly, can be applied in the refinement of one's own wisdom. I have certainly applied this particular notion in each sense since arriving at it, and to great effect—it constitutes a meaningful improvement in the effectiveness of the philosophical instrument.

The larger project of an intellectual revival of ethics, in the strictest Classical sense, must include a broad demonstration that the failure modes of competing theories arise from a failure of reference, and that the condition to which that failure of reference gives rise is as abjectly awful as I assert it to be. In service of the first matter, presuming one possesses an understanding of the explanatory nature of Classical philosophy—which I have endeavored to inculcate in the course of this essay—it suffices to demonstrate that the explanatory project avoids that dissonance. The latter project can be motivated in terms of various notions of alienation, but such notions all depend on reference to the condition itself, and—without an experiential comprehension of what is absent—there is necessarily no urgency, no motivation at all. It is important to note the distinction that has arisen once again, between abstract comprehension and true apprehension—the former cannot adequately motivate action. However, for those of us for whom the idea of this project and its clear, paramount necessity refers—for whom it is authentically motivated—there is limitless opportunity for significant work: in service of the corrective, restorative endeavor, in service of further advancement and application of a restored philosophy, and—most importantly—in service of one's own person, toward a better life and the highest achievement of virtue.