

Aristotle on Vice

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1. Introduction

Both¹ Plato and Aristotle tell us that the vicious² person's life is the most miserable kind of life.³ But unlike Plato, Aristotle does not provide a particularly detailed or explicit description of the vicious agent. Even worse, he appears to have not one but two views of the vicious agent. On the one hand, he appears to hold a view ('PVP' – the principled vicious person) according to which the vicious person is just like the virtuous person in all but one aspect: his values are upside down (or, at any rate, wrong). Although the vicious agent has the wrong conception of the human good (happiness), she still organizes her life around this conception just as the virtuous person does so around the correct one. The vicious person is a 'mirror-image' (Roochnik 2007, p. 211) of the virtuous person since they both 'enjoy a harmony between what they find pleasant and what they take to be good' (Brickhouse 2003, p. 4).⁴ Amélie Rorty describes this sort of vicious person as being self-indulgent 'as a matter of principle' (Rorty

¹ This paper originated in the comments on a paper by Erica Holberg entitled 'Does Aristotle's Vicious Person Wish to be Otherwise?' which was to be presented at the APA Central Division conference in 2014. For reasons out of our control, neither of us could attend the conference. I would like to thank her for giving me the opportunity to think about the topic, even if our views diverge. I would also like to thank the participants of the 2nd UCR Ancient Philosophy conference held at UCR in 2014 for their many helpful comments and suggestion on a talk that contained an early version of the ideas developed here.

² Aristotle uses several adjectives to refer to vicious people – *kakos* (bad or vicious), *phaulos* (base), *mochtheros* (wretched), and *poneros* (miserable) are the most common ones. There are also nouns that refer to the corresponding vicious state: *kakia* (badness or vice), *phaulotēs* (baseness), *mochthēria* (wretchedness) and *ponēria* (misery). Although all these expressions have their own peculiar semantic shades, they are used interchangeably in contexts in which Aristotle discusses vicious people in general. Sometimes, he refers to vicious people also as 'the many' (*hoi polloi*) or 'the most vulgar' (*hoi phortikōtatoi*). This is clear, for example, in *NE* 9.4 where the many are explicitly said to be base (*phauloi*) (1166b1) or in *NE* 1.5 where the many, being the most vulgar, are said to be slavish or servile (*andrapodōdeis*). The term 'servile' is frequently used by Aristotle to refer to a certain general feature of the vicious agent (namely, his lack of appreciation of, or his inability to discern, what is proper to feel or to do for human beings). So he characterizes as servile the uninhibited (*akolastos*) person (1118a25, 1118b21); the person lacking the ability to properly respond to insults (1126a8); or the person who enjoys amusements that are unbecoming of civilized or cultured people (1128a21). Like Plato, Aristotle also recognizes that the term 'unjust' (*adikos*) can be used to refer both to people who lack the particular virtue of justice, or who are vicious quite in general (*NE* 5.2).

³ See, for example, *Gorg.* 473b, 494e, 507c, 508b; *Rep.* 354a-b; *NE* 1166b27.

⁴ See also Irwin 2001, p. 78.

1980, p. 272), that is, as someone who acts viciously because she has adopted a general policy to pursue bodily pleasures. Similarly, Julia Annas writes:

Aristotle's bad man is like his good man in so far as both display unity of thought and feeling when they act; the bad are those who have had their grasp of the principles a man should follow in action corrupted by bad training or the effect of previous bad choices. Aristotle's bad man is someone who has come to have systematically perverted ends, who believes in what he is doing, unlike the Platonic bad man, who is never really given the belief that what he is doing is right, and is thus always presented as a pathetic mass of conflicts. (Annas 1993, p. 554)

According to this view, the vicious agent is a principled pursuer of pleasure and a committed follower of misguided principles. PVP finds most support in *NE 7*. At other places however, especially in *NE 9.4* as well as in *NE 3.10-12*, Aristotle appears to hold a different view ('CVP' – the conflicted vicious person). According to this view, the vicious person is an irrevocably conflicted and undisciplined pursuer of pleasures at hand. Unlike a PVP, she has no real commitments or principles. As the pursuit of pleasure leads her to commit many bad actions and often causes her harm, she is full of conflicts and regrets. This type of the vicious agent is more akin to the uncontrolled (*akratēs*) agent rather than being the mirror-image of the virtuous person.

It would appear, then, that the *NE* contains two different and, at least on the face of it, inconsistent views about the vicious agent. Scholars have offered three types of solutions to this problem. Some took PVP to be the correct interpretation of *NE 7* while, at the same time, accepting that CVP is the correct interpretation of *NE 9.4*. Accordingly, they argued that Aristotle's account is inconsistent. This inconsistency has been seen as both a theoretical failure⁵ as well as a virtue since it purportedly reflects the nature of the phenomenon of viciousness (Roochnik 2007, p. 216-7). Other scholars have argued that the two different descriptions of the vicious agent represent two different stages of the vicious agent's development: she begins as a 'principled' agent committed to the pursuit of pleasure, but the nature of non-rational desires ultimately undermines her own efforts (Brickhouse 2003). Lastly, many scholars have argued that the description of the vicious agent in *NE 7* is the true description of vice and that Aristotle's remarks in *NE 9.4*, when properly understood, are consistent with it.⁶

⁵ Annas 1977, p. 254; Gauthier and Jolif, 1970, note on 1166b6-7 at 733-4; Bostock 2000, p. 172-4.

⁶ Broadie and Rowe 2002, p. 420; Irwin 1999, p. 292.

The general tendency thus has been to see PVP as the correct view about Aristotle's conception of the vicious agent, while CVP has been treated at worst as a case of sloppiness on Aristotle's part and at best as a supplementary, even if somewhat puzzling, footnote to it. In this paper, I argue that this general tendency is an exegetical mistake. Contrary to the received view, there is only one picture of the vicious agent (namely, CVP) and it is the one brought out most clearly by Aristotle's remarks in *NE* 9.4 but also supported by much of what Aristotle says elsewhere. I argue that Aristotle's remarks in *NE* 7 that seemingly contradict this picture are not only consistent with it but in fact support it. The appearance of inconsistency is achieved only by assuming that Aristotelian vicious person *must* be a polar opposite of the virtuous person and reading this assumed conception into the text, specifically into the various passages in *NE* 7. However, there is nothing in the passages themselves that justifies PVP. At the end of the paper I turn to some consequences that adopting the CVP rather than the PVP view of the vicious agent has for our understanding of other issues in Aristotle's ethics.

2. The Vicious Agent

CVP

PVP is often accepted as the correct account because it is thought to fit the general framework of Aristotle's moral psychology. This 'fit' is however mostly assumed rather than argued for⁷ and a closer examination of the relevant features of the *NE* reveals that Aristotle consistently presupposes CVP rather than PVP. Thus I begin with presenting the case for CVP. In *NE* 7.1, Aristotle distinguishes six different states of character. Three of these states are to be avoided: vice (*kakia*), lack of control (*akrasia*), and beastliness (*thēriotēs*). Each of these undesirable states has its corresponding desirable opposite: for vice there is virtue (*aretē*), for lack of control self-control (*enkrateia*), and for beastliness heroic virtue (*hērōikē aretē*).⁸ In what way do the bad and the good character-states form pairs of opposites (*enantia*)?⁹ In the immediate context of *NE* 7.1, the opposition is connected with the desirability of each character-state. Thus virtue, as the most desirable state of character (leaving out the heroic kind), is the opposite of vice which is the least desirable one (leaving out beastliness). One could imagine the six states distributed on a scale of desirability, paired according to their distance from a middle point, representing a neutral value of indifference.

⁷ I will discuss some reasons for this assumption at the end of the paper.

⁸ Besides a short discussion of beastliness in *NE* 7.5, Aristotle spends little time discussing the last pair since both beastliness and heroic virtue are so rare and extreme that they fall outside the scope of his inquiry (*NE* 7.5, 1149a1-2) which focuses on characters that we can be reasonably expected to develop through our own efforts.

⁹ Besides *NE* 7.1, 1145a18, the claim that the various character-states (or at least vice and virtue) are opposites occurs also at *Cat.* 6b6, 14a23; *EE* 1228a23, 1234a25; *NE* 5.2, 1130a9, 7.9, 1151b24-31.

This ordering of the various character-states raises an obvious question: what makes a certain character, such as vice, undesirable and another state, such as self-control, desirable?¹⁰ Is it the presence of the same feature(s) or are different features responsible for the desirability of different character-states? In the *Republic*, Plato famously used unity of the soul as a (or perhaps as the) criterion of the goodness and desirability of a given character.¹¹ According to his view, the more unified the soul (i.e., the more its elements are harmonious with each other), the better and so the more desirable its state. If Aristotle were to accept a view along these lines, his six character states would be ordered according to their corresponding levels of the unity of the soul's elements, with beastliness and vice having no or least unity and virtue and heroic virtue having most (or being complete) unity.

There is substantial evidence that Aristotle treats the unity of the soul as a criterion of the goodness of characters. In *NE* 1.13, he distinguishes the rational and the non-rational natures (*phuseis*) or parts (*moria*) of the soul, on the basis that, in the case of the self-controlled and uncontrolled agents, the non-rational part is 'struggling and clashing with reason' (1102b17-8). The mark of the uncontrolled agent is that her non-rational part does not obey reason and she is overcome by pleasures (*NE* 7.7, 1150a14). In the case of the self-controlled agent and the temperate agent, however:

... [the non-rational part] of the self-controlled person is obedient to reason, and it is still even better listening [to reason] in the case of the temperate and courageous person since, [in their case], it chimes with reason (*homophōnei tō logō*) in everything. (*NE* 1.13, 1102b26-8)

According to this passage, there is an increasing level of integration of non-rational desires with reason. In the case of lack of control, some of the agent's non-rational desires clash with reason and, ultimately, the uncontrolled agent acts on them and against her reasoned decision (*NE* 3.2, 1111b13-15; 7.8, 1151a7). But even in the uncontrolled agent, the non-rational desires are not altogether unreceptive of reason's commands since, in the moment of an internal psychological struggle, the agent manages to temporarily placate or control them and so wavers and does not yet act on them (*NE* 7.7, 1150b20-9). As the passage quoted above makes clear, this integration is much stronger in the self-controlled agent since the non-rational desires do, ultimately, obey reason. Finally, the soul achieves a state of being in unison (*homophōnia*) between non-rational desires and reason in the case of the virtuous agent.

¹⁰ There is an easy answer: virtue is, by definition, the best state of character, just as vice is the worst. However, this answer has been challenged at least twice in Plato's dialogues (by Callicles in the *Gorgias* and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*) and so it is not one that Aristotle can rely on.

¹¹ See *Rep.* 443e1-2. Aristotle takes it to be Plato's guiding principle at least for the goodness of the state at *Pol.* 2.2, 1261a10-21.

If one were to follow this line of reasoning, vice would be a state in which we would have *kakophōnia* – a discord between reason and desires of such pervasive extent that the non-rational desires would not listen to reason at all, not even in the way in which they do in the uncontrolled agent. This view of vice finds its expression in *NE* 3.10-2 where Aristotle portrays the uninhibited (*akolastos*)¹² agent as somebody whose appetites are out of control and perhaps not governed by reason at all. He tells us that the uninhibited person's appetite is for excessive gratification that comes especially through the sense of touch, such as pleasures of drink, food, and sex (1118a27-b4). The uninhibited agent eats 'just about anything' (*to tuchon*) and drinks 'until he is beyond full' (*heōs an hupeplēsthēi*) (1118b16-7). And she is like this because her appetites are neither obedient (*eupēithes*) nor under the rule (*hupo tō archon*) and so have really gone far astray (*epi polu hēxei*). Aristotle adds:

For in the case of someone who lacks understanding, the desire for pleasure is insatiable and indiscriminate, and the activity of appetites increases [those] he had already from birth, and if they are large and intense, they even knock out his reasoning (*kai ton logismon ekkrouousin*). (*NE* 3.12, 1119b7-10).

This picture of the vicious person fits well with a number of remarks about the vicious character in *NE* 9.4 as well as in *NE* 7. The base (*phauloi*) and wretched (*mochtheroi*) people are at odds with themselves (I will explain this as I go along) since they have appetites and wishes for different things, just like the uncontrolled people (*NE* 9.4, 1166b7-8). But they are worse than the uncontrolled people since not only are their souls in turmoil, tearing them apart (1166b19-23), but they also have nothing loveable about themselves at all (1166b17-8). In the uncontrolled agent, the reason still exhorts the agent to the right thing and so, at least to this extent, the uncontrolled agent has something good and loveable about herself. In the vicious person, however, reason – insofar its possession of the *principle* of one's actions is concerned (*NE* 7.8, 1151a15-7) – is destroyed (*phtherei*).¹³ This means neither that the vicious people

¹² The *akolastos* is a kind of vicious agent that is characterized by appetites for excessive pleasures of food, drink, and sex. The word 'akolastos' is traditionally translated by 'intemperant' or 'self-indulgent'. These are good translations, but they lose the meaning of *kolazein* (to chastise or keep in check or within boundaries). The term 'akolastos' suggests somebody who lacks the willingness to keep, or does not keep his desires in check. This is to be contrasted with a person someone who lacks the ability to control her desires even though if she is willing to do so (i.e., the *akratēs*).

¹³ I take it that by the 'principle' (*archē*), Aristotle does not mean a decision or desire that initiates an action, but a principle that *explains* it, such as for example, justice (Cf. *APo* 85b28-86a3). It is possible to interpret the passage as meaning that vice destroys the *good* principle rather than that it destroys the principle. But even in that case, Aristotle need not (and, as I argue, does not) imply that vice thereby creates its own, explicitly endorsed, rationally grounded and stable bad principle.

lacks reason nor that they merely have the wrong view about what is good. Rather, it means that they have no stable, rationally grounded principle according to which they would act and which would, in turn, explain their actions. They change their view of the good according to what seems most pleasant to them at a given moment – even if what seems pleasant to them is in fact harmful (1166b 8-9):

For the many think that [*eudaimonia*] is something palpable and obvious, like pleasure or wealth or honor, while others think it still something else. In fact, even the same person often changes his view: for having fallen sick he thinks it is health, but having fallen into poverty he thinks it is wealth. And when they have become aware of their own ignorance, they admire those who say something grand and beyond them. (*NE* 1.4, 1095a22-6)

The vicious agent is characterized by the fact that her reason fails to guide her life on the basis of a reasoned conception of what a good life. Her conception of the good changes according to her feelings and non-rational desires. She thus follows a mere appearance of pleasure which, as Aristotle repeatedly stresses, can be deceiving. Consequently, her decisions also reflect her current interests and pleasures rather than any *principles* she would have adopted, on the basis of reflection, as her own long-term policies of conduct. In this sense, her reason does not exercise any command over her non-rational desires. This is not to say that we cannot describe her as acting on some sort of hedonistic principle, but we should not attribute to her an explicit and rationally grounded possession of it. She is like the fool who although capable of reasoning and decisions does not organize her life around some aim or purpose (*EE* 1.2, 1214b6-10) but wanders from one random pleasure to another, indulging in any that is at hand. Aristotle says as much in an important passage at 1146b22-3, but the sentence can be translated in two ways of which one supports my interpretation better than the other:

1. For the [uninhibited person] acts having decided to do so, always thinking that one should pursue the pleasant thing at hand (*nomizōn aei dein to paron hēdu diōkein*), but the [uncontrolled person] does not think that, but pursues it nevertheless.
2. For the [uninhibited person] acts having decided to do so, thinking that one should always pursue the pleasant thing at hand, but the [uncontrolled person] does not think that, but pursues it nevertheless.

Translation (1) does not require that the vicious person has an explicit principle that would say ‘go always for the pleasure at hand’. It merely requires that anytime the vicious person finds something

pleasant, she thinks she should go for it. This interpretation of the passage is supported by what Aristotle tells us about the way in which the many or the vulgar people pursue pleasure as the highest good:

Concerning the good and happiness: judging from their lives, the many, the most vulgar (*phortikōtatoi*), seem to suppose, not unreasonably, that it is pleasure. Hence, they also love the life of enjoyment. ... And so the many seem altogether slavish (*andrapodōdeis*) since they are deciding (*prohairoumenoi*) on the life of grazing animals. (*NE* 1.5, 1095b14-20)

As this passage tells us, the many have a *practice* to go for what seems pleasant to them at the moment (*NE* 7.3, 1146b18-24) rather than a conception of the good that they would have formulated on the basis of reflection about what is worthwhile to pursue in life in the way in which, for example, Eudoxus formulated it (*NE* 10.2, 1172b10-23). Their practice embodies a principle ('it is always right to go for what seems pleasant at the moment'), but this principle is derived by us from the observation of their lives. Of course, the passage is compatible with them having, at any given moment, some sort of principle, but this principle would simply reflect their current interests and feelings and would not be a result of any reflection of the required sort.

On translation (2), however, the vicious person might well be thought to hold an explicit principle – namely that it is always right to pursue pleasure at hand. However, this translation should be rejected on several grounds. First, it does not cohere well with the way Aristotle describes the vulgar people in *NE* 1.4-5. Second, it requires that 'always' (*aei*) modifies 'pursue' (*diōkein*) instead of 'thinking' (*nomizōn*). This is not impossible, but it is less likely since in that case Aristotle could have written *nomizōn dein to paron hēdu aei diōkein* instead of *nomizōn aei dein to paron hēdu diōkein*.¹⁴ Third, it is hard to imagine that *any* explicit hedonist (i.e., someone who has reflected on what one should pursue in life) would ever formulate so stupid a principle when even a brief reflection reveals that it is not always in one's interest to pursue immediate pleasure.¹⁵ Moreover, one might well think that even *if* (or precisely when) pleasure is the ultimate goal of the vicious person, the vicious person cannot even have a stable conception of the

¹⁴ The whole phrase is 'ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἄγεται προαιρούμενος, νομίζων ἀεὶ δεῖν τὸ παρὸν ἢ δὴ διώκειν'. Although generally speaking adverbs tend to precede the word that they go with, they often also follow the word, especially for the purpose of emphasis. In this particular sentence, the problem is that we have a string of four verbal forms 'ἄγεται προαιρούμενος νομίζων δεῖν' and so the position of ἀεὶ needs to be carefully chosen to avoid confusion. If it were to precede νομίζων, it would also follow προαιρούμενος and its ambivalent position there could suggest that it emphasizes the fact that the agent always (i.e., on each occasion) *decides* to act. In order to avoid this meaning, ἀεὶ is shifted after νομίζων where it is best interpreted as going with it, rather than with δεῖν or διώκειν. It would have been easy for Aristotle to shift it before διώκειν (e.g., Pl., *Leges*, 740b4 and 963a2) if that was his meaning.

¹⁵ Cf. Plato, *Prot.* 353c-e.

good since what we find pleasant at a particular time and place, whether long term or short term, tends to vary widely. So to say that pleasure is the final aim is not say something uninformative, but also not something quite informative enough since it very much depends on what it is that one finds pleasant. But people do not find the same things pleasant at all times. In view of this, one could even maintain that *even if* the clause should be translated as ‘thinking that one should always pursue the pleasant thing at hand’ it should be understood as meaning ‘always thinking that one should pursue the pleasant thing at hand’.¹⁶

This conception of the vicious agent fits well with what Aristotle tells us about them in *NE* 3. Take the coward who throws away her shield and runs away from a battle. On this view, he is acting out of excessive fear for his life and for the sake of his own safety thinking (only now and because of his current fear) that safety is the most important goal. But at other times, for example when he decides to commit adultery or indulge in heavy drinking, he does not care about safety at all (although *now* he should). But how about an unjust agent who acts out of *pleonexia* (*NE* 5.2, 1130a16-23) and so thinks that he should have a larger share of safety (or money) than others? Here one should not think that the agent has adopted a general policy – a rational principle that he should have more. Rather, part of the reason why the vicious agent goes into extremes is that he has no stable conception of the good that could regulate his emotional responses and actions concerning pleasures and pains. The extent to which he overreaches is not dictated by him having a deliberate conception of how safety or wealth fits into his good life but, rather, by the way in which he now feels or perceives threats to his safety or his own merits.¹⁷ He is liable to overreach precisely because he lacks a firm principle, not because he has one.

Thus also the conflicts that occur in the vicious agent’s soul are not ones in which appetites would clash with reasoned choice made on the basis of considering usefulness or fineness (*NE* 3.11, 1119a12-21). Rather, they are conflicts in which something appearing pleasant (and desired as such) has previously led to pain and so it is rejected, because of the memory of the painful consequence, by reason. But the vicious person does not struggle even in the face of such harmful desires for pleasures as the uncontrolled person does. She shrinks from resisting them even though she thinks, at least for a while, that she should resist them (*NE* 9.4, 1166b10).¹⁸ She lets herself be *persuaded* (*NE* 7.8, 1151a12-4) on account of the pleasure at hand (*NE* 7.3, 1146b23-4). Thus at the moment she acts, she generally does not

¹⁶ In a similar way, in which ‘John doesn’t think the book is good’ really means that ‘John thinks the book is not good’, rather than that he is not thinking about the book’s being good. I owe thanks for this point to one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper.

¹⁷ This is fully compatible with him deliberating and planning about how to achieve his goals – he can be as clever (*NE* 6.2, 1144a25-9) as anybody.

¹⁸ Aristotle sometimes characterizes the vicious person as having a certain kind of *akrasia*. Besides *NE* 9.4, there are such passages also in *EE* (e.g., 1229b36). As should be clear by now, this is not *akrasia* in the technical sense but, rather, the kind of *akrasia* that is exhibited by someone who is *akolastos* – that is, by one who fails or is incapable to correct or chastise her appetites, as the etymology suggests. The *akolastos* character can be conceived of as lacking discipline to her appetites, thus lacking a certain kind of self-control. See also note 18 below.

feel conflicted (*NE* 9.4, 1166b23).¹⁹ But since the action (predictably) leads to subsequent pain, she also comes to regret what she previously enjoyed (1166b24) wishing that she would have done something else or that she had not desired it in the first place. Even her subsequent regret is based solely on the pain she herself experiences and *not*, as in the case of the uncontrolled agent, on her knowledge or belief (one she had before she acted) that the action was wrong or bad. If her action did not lead to pain this time, she would have no regrets. It is only afterwards when the painful consequences arise that she comes to regret her actions (or when she anticipates those consequences and her own regret).

In this way, then, looking back at her own life, she can come to hate it since it is a life that fails to be as she would like it to be. She does not regret the harm to others or disapproves – from the point of view of the normative standards of virtue – of the way she is (*NE* 7.7, 1150a17-25, 7.8, 1150b29-30). Rather, she regrets that things did not work out for her as she had hoped for or that something else were not pleasant to her (*NE* 9.4, 1166b20-6).²⁰ The vicious person's life is thus 'utterly miserable' (1166b28) since it is a life spent in searching for pleasures that however finds no ultimate satisfaction (1166b18-9). And so it is a miserable life not only from an objective point of view, but also insofar as the vicious person perceives it herself.

PVP

Aristotle thus presents a single and coherent conception of the vicious agent throughout the whole of the *NE*. However, scholars have not seen parts of the textual evidence I have just referred to in this light. They interpreted a number of passages in *NE* 7 as supporting a quite different conception of the

¹⁹ This does not mean that she never experiences an occurrent conflict between wish and appetite. The point is, rather, that that is not the relevant or typical feature of the vicious agent (as it is of the uncontrolled one). At 1166b7-11, Aristotle describes people who are *phauloi* as being at odds with themselves, having appetites for something else than they wish for, 'just like the uncontrolled people do' (1166b8). Is this not evidence that the vicious agents suffer from a contemporaneous conflict between their reason and non-rational desires? The response is twofold. First, nothing I say about the vicious agent prevents them from having such conflicts. But these conflicts do not arise in them in the way in which they do in the uncontrolled agent where there is a conflict between rationally-grounded conception of goodness and appetite. In the vicious agent, the conflict is between a wish based on past experience fuelled by a fear of pain that results from otherwise pleasant indulgence and a current non-rational desire to indulge. Second, the resolution of the conflict is different. In the uncontrolled agent, appetite moves the agent against reason. The vicious agent gives in and becomes, at least for a while, persuaded that she should indulge (1151a12-5).

²⁰ It is often maintained that Aristotle contradicts himself when he asserts at *NE* 7.7, 1150a17-25 and 7.8, 1150b29-30 that the uninhibited agent is not prone to regret and at *NE* 9.4, 1166b20-6 that she is prone to regret. However, in the two passages in *NE* 7, he is talking about regrets concerning particular actions – the uninhibited agent is not prone to regret because what she does she does on his own decision. In *NE* 9.4, on the other hand, the vicious person comes to regret her past, that is her being such that the things she enjoyed turned out badly for her. This does not mean that she regrets the actions themselves (after all, she enjoyed them). Rather she regrets her being such that she chose them rather than some other (pleasant) actions that would not have had those consequences. On this point, I agree with Pakaluk 1998, p. 177, and Price 1989, p. 129.

vicious agent. In particular, they have read them as supporting PVP rather than CVP. The cumulative evidence of the passages in *NE 7* yields the following list of the features of the vicious agent:

1. The vicious person performs her vicious actions on decision.²¹
2. The uninhibited kind of the vicious person always thinks that it is right to pursue the pleasure at hand (*NE 7.3*, 1146b18-24).
3. The vicious person sometimes pursues (excessive or base) pleasure even without having an appetite for it or just a mild one (*NE 7.4*, 1148a15-20).
4. The vicious person is persuaded to pursue (excessive) pleasures, thinking them correct objects to pursue (*NE 7.8*, 1151a11-20).
5. The vicious person is not regretful concerning her actions since she sticks to her decision (*NE 7.7*, 1150a17-25; *7.8*, 1150b29-30).
6. Vice is a continuous condition (*NE 7.8*, 1150b32-51a7).
7. The vicious person does not recognize that she is vicious (*NE 7.8*, 1150b32-51a7).
8. The vicious person does not possess the principle of actions (i.e., that for the sake of which, namely the conception of the human good) since it has been destroyed (*NE 7.8*, 1151a11-20).

I have already referred to features 2, 4, 5 (see note 19 above) and 8 as supporting CVP. This does not mean, of course, that they cannot be used to support PVP. But it means that these features (and the corresponding passages) are not decisive by themselves and that their meaning depends on one's view of the vicious agent rather than the other way round. A defender of PVP would at this point presumably suggest that these features can only be properly understood in the light of other, more central features, such as 1, 3, 6 and 7. The most prominent feature of the vicious agent is undoubtedly (1): she does vicious actions on decision. This feature is repeatedly emphasized by Aristotle in *NE 7* since it is one that distinguishes the vicious person from the uncontrolled agent who does bad actions too but against (and not on) her decision. It also led most commentators to suppose that the vicious agent exhibits a harmony between her non-rational desires and reason, adopting a stable conception of happiness. For example, Terence Irwin writes:

²¹ This claim occurs five times in the following passage: *NE 7.3*, 1146b18-24; *7.4*, 1148a15-20; *7.7*, 1150a17-25; *7.8*, 1150b29-51a7.

In the vicious person the two parts of the soul agree in accepting the guidance of the rational part. If the non-rational part were not subordinate to the rational part, the only function for the rational part would be purely technical and instrumental deliberation about ways to satisfy desires of the non-rational part; such deliberation would not result in decisions. If that were the only function of the rational part, the vicious person could not act on decision; for decision rests on wish (*boulêsis*), a desire of the rational part. (Irwin 2001, p. 78)

The main idea of this argument is that if the vicious agent's soul were to be conceived of as being in conflict in a similar way in which the uncontrolled person's soul is, the vicious person's rational desires (wishes) would be contrary to her appetites. Since decisions are based on wishes and not on appetites, this would mean that at least some of the vicious person's vicious actions could not be done on decision. This is because vicious actions of at least the uninhibited (*akolastos*) agent are aimed at satisfying the agent's appetites and these vicious actions would be (at least on some occasions) against her wishes and so, also against (and not on) her decision.

This argument assumes that the only way in which wishes and appetites can come apart is by direct and contemporaneous opposition that persists throughout the action and that the conflict is between one's conception of the good and one's appetite for some pleasure at hand. But, as I have already argued above, this is not the kind of conflict that Aristotle ascribes to the vicious agent. But perhaps the idea is a bit more nuanced. Vice is supposed to be a continuous condition (feature 6). Given that vice is a kind of character, it should be a settled disposition to feel and act in a certain way, a disposition that is reflected in one's decisions (*NE* 2.1, 1111b5-7). But in order for one's decisions to reflect any such disposition, they need to be based on stable rational desires (wishes) which reflect the character of the agent. And in order for them to do so, the character itself (including, most prominently, one's non-rational desires) must be in harmony and not in conflict with those wishes.

This more nuanced objection does not succeed. When Aristotle says that vice is a continuous condition (1150b32-51a7), he also says that lack of control is not such a condition. Rather, being more like epilepsy than dropsy, lack of control is episodic. That does not mean that lack of control is not a character – it is clearly classified as one in *NE* 7.1. It will be useful to distinguish between a settled disposition to feel and act in a certain way (i.e., a character quite in general) and a stable disposition to act

in a certain way.²² A settled disposition does not imply that the agent reliably and always acts in a certain way (in similar circumstances, and so on). One can have a settled disposition precisely insofar as one is not capable of acting in such a way – one can be ‘settled’ into being a foolish, frivolous, or unprincipled person. We refer to such persons as being predictably unreliable, incurably foolish, or hopelessly careless. A stable disposition, on the other hand, presupposes that one acts in some way that shows a firm and principled commitment. It is what Aristotle calls acting while being firm and unchanging (*bebaiōs kai ametakinētōs echōn*) at *NE* 2.4, 1105a34-5 when he describes the way in which the virtuous person acts. As he makes it repeatedly clear in *NE* 2, habituation need not lead to firm and unchanging ways of acting; it can also lead to becoming a fool and a follower of mere appearances.

In view of this, one might start to doubt the claim that in order to reflect one’s character, one’s decisions need to be based on wishes that reflect some principle or principles to which the agent is firmly and rationally committed. In fact, Aristotle never says that the vicious agent has a stable conception of the good and so a stable wish to be or to act in some specific way – a principle, as it were, that would dictate that, for example, one should achieve the maximum long-term (or even short-term) pleasures. The one passage (*NE* 7.3, 1146b18-24 – feature 3) that is sometimes cited in support of this view (e.g., Roochnik 2007, p. 210), merely says that the uninhibited person will go for anything that is even slightly appealing to her (presumably, when nothing more attractive is available) or even, perhaps, out of boredom, curiosity, or the need to be pleased and entertained at all times (since he does not find pleasure in, say, intellectual activities), will go for pleasant things even if she has no particular appetite for them at the moment. The passage does not say that the vicious agent goes for pleasant things because of some principle(s) she holds even if these things are such that she does not feel like having them at all. This is not only an absurd interpretation of the text (since, I take it, neither the vicious person nor anyone else thinks that she should consume something for the sake of pleasure, say ice-cream, even if she does not in fact find it pleasant) but also quite unnecessary since there are other things that can motivate the agent to taste or try something that she has no particular appetite for.

I have now dealt with all but one feature, namely (7): the vicious person does not recognize that she is vicious (*NE* 7.8, 1150b32-51a7). Does this feature not suggest that the vicious person is persuaded about the way she acts and thinks and that, in order to do so, she needs to have a stable conception of the good? If one were to assume that the vicious person has such firmly held views about the good, one would also need to assume that she has adopted them on the basis of reflection about what is good and bad. But this means that, at least in principle, the vicious person is capable of reflecting on what is truly

²² The distinction is artificial insofar as the ordinary use of ‘settled’ and ‘stable’ is concerned, but the purpose is to capture a real distinction between characters that are based on stable principles and those that are not.

good and fine. But since vice is generally shunned and shamed by the society in which one lives, it is highly unlikely that the person would not be confronted with views to the contrary – that is, that she would not be aware of the fact that *her* conception of the good differs radically from what other people take it to be. In fact, if she were so unaware of it, the chances are she would be caught and publicly shamed – a far cry from the clever completely unjust man of Plato’s *Republic* 2 who, being completely vicious, nevertheless manages to manipulate his image so as to be perceived as virtuous. However, if one has never even developed a conception of the good – if one has remained a fool (*EE* 1.2, 1214b6-10) – then perhaps one also never notices that one is in fact vicious (whether by one’s own or by the society’s standards) – since one in fact lacks any criterion (any conception of goodness or fineness) by which one could so judge.²³ Vice escapes notice because it is not a condition in which one reflects on one’s character in view of any conception of goodness or fineness.²⁴ And this is, in fact, how Aristotle tells us the many (and so the vicious) are:

But in fact it seems that [arguments] are enough to persuade and incite the civilized among young people and make a well-born and truly fine-loving character capable of possessing virtue, but they are unable to persuade the many towards being fine and good (*kalokagathia*). For they naturally obey fear and not shame and avoid base things not because of shame but because of retributions. For living by feelings they pursue their own pleasures and the sources of those and avoid the opposed pains. But they have no notion of the fine and of the truly pleasant, being without any taste. What kind of argument (or speech) could change the character of such people? For it is not possible, or not easy to change by argument (or speech) what has long been established by habit. (*NE* 10.9, 1178b8-18)

²³ As Shakespeare in *As You Like It* says, ‘The Foole doth thinke he is wise, but the wiseman knows himself to be a Foole’.

²⁴ One might object that in *NE* 9.4 Aristotle attributes a kind of self-loathing or self-hate to vicious people (*NE* 9.4, 1166b6-19) and that that must involve some recognition of the fact that they are not good or virtuous (Cf. Pakaluk 1998, p. 177). There are, however, different kinds of self-loathing. There is the kind of self-loathing of the uncontrolled person in which one disapproves of one’s own way of being – of one’s own desires and actions (Cf. the story of Leontius in *Rep.* 439e-440a). There is also the kind of self-loathing in which one disapproves of the way in which one *was* (or might be again) – as when one disapproves of one’s previous attachments or appetites since they led him to bad consequences. It is this latter kind that Aristotle attributes to the vicious agent (1166b15-7). This latter kind of self-loathing (if we should use this un-Aristotelian term) might even be connected with a sort of ethical disapproval – but not one based on recognition of true virtue (or true fineness) but, rather, one based on seeing how what one has done has resulted in bad consequences for oneself. Rather than recognizing what virtue (or vice) really is and disapproving of oneself from that point of view, one contrasts one’s former (or perhaps future) self with the kind of self that one *now* thinks one should be or is (as when people who *now* care about health – once they got sick – disapprove of their former self that had eating habits that led to the sickness). The vicious agent thus need not regret that she has not been successful at being vicious – after all, she has no clue that she is vicious (Brickhouse 2003). Rather, she might come to hate her former self for not being smart enough to benefit herself properly, for example because of being weak or naïve.

As Aristotle portrays it in the passage, it is not the case that the many hold mistaken views about what is good or fine. Rather, they do not have any worked out conception of the good or the fine to begin with. They adopt what presently seems good to them (that is, what they find pleasant) without asking themselves whether it is in fact fine or good for them. This will, of course, mean that sometimes they pick up or adopt something that is in fact good (such as health). But their commitment to any such value is always conditioned by them finding it pleasant. This conditional commitment does not mean that they have to actively reflect on whether or not something they happened to adopt as their end is still the most pleasant thing. Rather, they follow it as long as they find it pleasant or as long as something else they come across does not strike them as more pleasant. Similarly, their commitment to values sanctioned by the society is conditional as well. They do not adopt them because they think they are good or fine (they do not spend time reflecting on such things). Rather, they follow them (even if they are unpleasant) because of the threat of punishment.

Varieties of Badness

I conclude that there is no persuasive evidence for PVP and that all evidence points to CVP. One might still wonder, however, whether, if I am right, Aristotle fails to recognize an important kind of vicious or bad person. After all, *we* find the principled but evil character more interesting and, potentially, much more morally and otherwise dangerous²⁵ than the kind of vicious character that, on at least my interpretation in this paper, Aristotle proposes. In particular, we find people who become entirely principled, even martyr-like, followers of evil ideas more scary than people who, in Aristotle's view, are the paradigmatic vicious people – the unprincipled pathetic mess of feelings, as Julia Annas describes it.

Aristotle is not unaware of this kind of bad people. In *NE* 7.4, he describes cases of lack of control and self-control that concern things like wealth, advantage, power, victory, or honor. Since these

²⁵ The Machiavellian villain is a common character in both literature and film: from the classic portrayals by Milton (Satan) and Shakespeare (Iago in *Othello*) to the modern characters of The Emperor Palpatine in the *Star Wars* film saga or Frank Underwood in the *House of Cards* television show. In fact, Plato's completely unjust man in *Republic* 2 is best understood as such Machiavellian villain. But notice that Plato argues that, in fact, the portrayal of the unjust person in book 2 is incorrect – the tyrannical character in book 9 is without friends, never getting a taste of true freedom and friendship (576a), the most wretched, his soul full of slavery, illiberality (577c-d), disorder and regret (577d). It is also worth noting that when Socrates in the *Republic* (351a-52b) argues that in order to get what one desires, one needs to have a certain kind of justice or self-control since otherwise one's appetites would make one 'incapable of achieving anything' (352a) he is arguing that insofar as one is in fact in control of oneself, one is less vicious or, alternatively, that one can only achieve what one sets out to achieve (and so be a true agent) only if one exhibits a certain kind of unity between one's reason and desires and this means, for him, that it cannot be vice that makes one achieve things.

things are naturally choiceworthy, he seems to think that lack of control concerning them is less shameful than lack of control *simpliciter* which concerns bodily pleasures. But be that as it may, it is not difficult to see that the bad but principled person – the power-hungry manipulator, the money-hungry operator of a Ponzi-scheme, or the militant religious extremist – fits best a certain type of (reverse or perverted) self-controlled person. After all, such a person must go against much of human natural feelings of affection and community towards others. It is not a chance that she is often seen, in literature as well as in real life, acting against her own inclination to feel compassion with those that she is about to harm.²⁶

There might be many different reasons why Aristotle's conception of vice (*kakia*) is different from the conception of the evil but principled person. For the present purposes, it is perhaps enough to note that insofar as the Aristotelian vicious agent fails to have a conception of the good, she fails to exercise her human function (*ergon*) since she lives by feelings and not in accordance with reason – rather, she uses reason in accordance with feelings. Hence, she is not just mistaken (as the erroneously self-controlled person is) but she fails to live a human kind of life, choosing instead the life of grazing animals (1095b18-23). The principled evil person has at least this much going for herself – that she guides her life by a reasoned conception of the good.

In Aristotle's theory, then, vice is more like a failure of proper agency than a moral failure (in the more Christian or modern sense of the word 'moral'). There are few things that make this more obvious than the paradoxical fact that, as Aristotle tells us in *NE* 9.4, the vicious person 'does not have a friendly disposition towards himself' and so 'does not even share his own enjoyments and distresses' (*NE* 9.4, 1166b20-8). The vicious agent's past life is often hateful to the vicious person since her past actions (i.e., actions that she was eager to do before) resulted in her current distress. As a consequence, she comes to dissociate herself from her own past. For example, being now sick and health-conscious, she comes to disapprove of her former, cigarette-smoking self and the ways in which this former self spent time and money on smoking to the detriment of what she now thinks really matters. Of course, once she gets healthy, she will most likely cease to think of health as the most important value and, instead choose something else – in fact, as Aristotle says, probably any random thing (*to tuchon*), whether it be food, sports or philosophy. The vicious person thus perceives her past as not being quite her own, at least not *hers* as she currently is: the current anti-smoking crusader has trouble recognizing herself in the former compulsive smoker and so trouble in relating to her life *as whole* as belonging to her.

Before moving on to the last section, I would like to emphasize that nothing in what I said about the Aristotelian vicious agent prevents her from having long-term goals or from running a Ponzi scheme.

²⁶ One need only be reminded of Medea's attempts to silence her love and compassion for her own children before she murders them.

The difference between the principled evil person and the Aristotelian vicious agent shows, among other things, in the way in which they are committed or attached to their goals. It might well turn out that the Aristotelian vicious person has long-term goals and pursues them diligently. The problem is that her commitment to those goals is not rationally grounded but rests on her finding it pleasant. If her nature and circumstances happen to be such that she never ceases to find it pleasant, she might never see any reason to stop pursuing it. Of course, this is quite unlikely and would require a great degree of luck but it is not inconceivable that it should be so. Still, as Aristotle says, it is foolish to be this way (*EE* 1.2, 1214b6-14).

3. Some Consequences

In conclusion, I would like to briefly consider consequences of this picture of vice for some controversies concerning various aspects of Aristotle's ethical philosophy. Although I do not think that the conception of the vicious agent that I have argued for can settle these (or other) controversies, I do believe that it can provide a criterion for excluding certain ways of solving them or, alternatively, add an additional support in favor of some of them.

The first consequence concerns Aristotle's conception of wish (*boulēsis*). If the conception of the vicious agent that I have argued for is along the right lines and if it is admitted (and I see no reason why it should not be) that such vicious agent have wishes, then the conception of wish according to which all wishes are *explicitly* and rationally grounded (e.g., by being the results of deliberation about what conduces to living well) in the agent's conception of *eudaimonia* cannot be correct.²⁷ The vicious people change their views about what is good according to what seems to be pleasant to them at the moment and this, of course, very much depends on their present state and circumstances. In this sense, they do not follow any conception or knowledge of what is good. This does not mean that the wishes of the virtuous persons are not so explicitly grounded – that might very well be so. But it does mean that in order to simply have a wish, one is not required to have an explicit conception of *eudaimonia* in which one would ground one's rational desires.²⁸ However, the argument does not decide between the two other candidates for what wishes could be, namely between the view that they might not be based in one's conception of *eudaimonia* but they still need to be based on reasons (rather than mere appearances)²⁹ and the view that

²⁷ This conception is perhaps most famously defended by Terry Irwin. See, for example, Irwin 2007, p. 174. For a slightly different version see Mele 1984.

²⁸ Some scholars argue that in order to have a wish one need not have such explicit conception of *eudaimonia* but that one still has to have a kind of lived conception of the human good which cannot be reduced to the (or need not be articulated at all in any) intellectual grasp of it. See McDowell 1998, and Price 2011.

²⁹ For the best-known version of this view see Broadie 1991, p. 107.

they are they are based on mere appearances (of goodness) but distinguished from non-rational desires by involving some sort of conceptualization rather than by being based on reasons (Moss 2012, p. 225).

The second consequence concerns Aristotle's requirement that the student of ethical philosophy is to possess 'the that' before he can 'listen with competence' to lectures concerning virtues and living well (1094b28-95a6; 1095b3-8). Iakovos Vasiliou has argued that to possess 'the that' is to 'recognize an individual action as belonging to a particular ethical kind' (Vasiliou 1996, p. 784). On his view, such ability is rational in the sense that it already involves the possession of 'the because' since it involves understanding why the action falls under the kind (Ibid., p. 789). The vicious agent, although capable of understanding the *Metaphysics* and the *De Anima* is incapable of understanding the *Nicomachean Ethics* (with the possible exception of book 1) since the reasons that Aristotle induces for recognizing that some actions are fair, just, and so on, these arguments will 'fall on deaf ears' (Ibid., p. 792). Presumably, they do so fall because the vicious person has a quite different conception of what is fair, just, and so on. The vicious and the virtuous person are in fundamental disagreement about what is noble and virtuous.

Vasiliou thinks that the picture of the vicious agent in *NE* 9.4 goes against his view since, as he interprets it, the vicious agent has some recognition of the true value of the particular actions (i.e., he can see at least to some extent that what he does is wrong) and so has, on that account, regrets (Ibid., p. 792, note 48). I have argued that this worry is incorrect since the vicious person's regret does not concern not doing what is truly noble since the vicious agent does not have any notion of the noble to begin with. Vasiliou's interpretation is thus not threatened by *NE* 9.4 in the way he thinks it is. However, the conception of the vicious agent that I have argued for threatens his interpretation in another way. If true, it locates the reason why the vicious agent will not be a competent listener of ethical philosophy not in the fact that the arguments about why certain actions are virtuous will fall on deaf ears insofar as the vicious person will not recognize those very actions as instances of virtuous behavior (having a different conception of what is worthwhile) but, rather, in the more mundane fact that the vicious person does not understand – since he has no notion of – what it means for an action to be fine (*kalos*) or virtuous. In other words, although the vicious can presumably tell us which actions are thought to be fine (I take it that even the vicious agent has grown up with the stories about virtuous heroes and is aware of the common public moral sentiments), his understanding of what is fine or right for her, if any, is correlated with what presently appears pleasant to her. So at times she might agree with the virtuous agent and her reasons for regarding certain actions as fine (as when she becomes conscious of his ignorance), at other times, however, she will remain completely unmoved by the very same reasons. She is not a competent audience for lectures in ethical philosophy not because she has fundamental disagreements about the very facts of

ethical life but because she is not even at the stage at which such disagreements (or agreements) can arise.³⁰

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³⁰ This state of one's soul is the one that Socrates encounters in some of his interlocutors. Often, both he and his interlocutor begin with an initial agreement about whether some course of action is right or wrong but very soon it turns out that the interlocutor has in fact no real understanding of what that means and ends up contradicting himself. These interlocutors have little patience with Socrates and leave the scene without appearing to have profited in any way from the discussion (see, e.g., *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor*, or the discussion with Cephalus in *Rep.* 1). This distinguishes them from other interlocutors, such as Thrasymachus, Protagoras, or Callicles who have worked-out views about what virtue and vice are and who are and can be engaged at a quite different level and, we get the impression, who also can (even if not immediately) profit from such discussion. Notice that, *contra* Vasiliou, this does not require that they agree on which actions are virtuous: certainly Callicles or Thrasymachus argue that the actions that Socrates thinks are virtuous are not in fact virtuous at all.

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