

Aristotle on Conscience, Sin, and Guilt

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“For every member of the church, it is conscience to which we have the ultimate responsibility and by which we will be judged. For that reason, while Catholic teaching has an essential role in moral decision-making, it is conscience that has the privileged place. As Pope Francis has stated, the church’s role is to form consciences, not replace them.” Thus did Robert Cardinal McElroy defend himself against charges that he had undermined Church teaching by his call for a pastoral stance of inclusion for divorced and remarried Catholics and members of the LGBT community regarding reception of the Eucharist. Worth noting is that nowhere in his two articles did Cardinal McElroy define what he meant by “conscience,” some widespread and non-problematic understanding apparently being assumed.¹ Cardinal McElroy is by no means peculiar in this regard, and the reader who attends to this point will be struck by how few are those who speak fervently about the primacy of conscience and then go on to explain what they mean by it. Material from an outstanding 2021 work by Professor Matthew Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience: A Century of Catholic Moral Theology* (which inspired this article), supports the same point within a broad context. The statement of *Gaudium et spes* that “conscience is the

¹ Quotation from the second of two articles: Robert W. McElroy, “Cardinal McElroy on ‘Radical Inclusion’ for L.G.B.T. People, Women and Others in the Catholic Church,” *America*, January 24, 2023 (americamagazine.org/faith/2023/01/24/mcelroy-synodality-inclusion-244587), and “Cardinal McElroy Responds to His Critics on Sexual Sin, the Eucharist, LGTB and Divorced/Remarried Catholics,” *America*, March 2, 2023 (americamagazine.org/faith/2023/03/02/mcelroy-eucharist-sin-inclusion-response-244827).

most secret core and sanctuary of a man,” however true it may be, is not a definition, certainly not an adequate one, because it immediately elicits the question, “And what is that?” But, whatever Cardinal McElroy himself meant by “conscience,” it is clear from the quotation that he takes it to be the moral ace of trumps—certainty about its being an ace, but unclarity about its nature. This is an odd state of affairs, at least if Socrates is correct in believing that a clear and agreed-upon definition is the necessary foundation upon which further rational discussion can be conducted, as related by Plato (*Gorgias* 447c–48e).

This article makes no attempt to alter this state of affairs, leaving the definition of conscience unsettled, though its author earnestly hopes to encourage others to assume that task themselves. Different contexts and purposes often call for different definitions, and the goal of this essay is not to argue for or against any particular definition, but to show the necessity of clarity regarding whatever definition is employed. The same important questions can be put to any treatment of conscience—but which questions are they and why are they important? Answering these questions is the focus of this article. It employs considerations presented by Aristotle² to develop those questions and show their importance. Worthy of note in this regard is that Aristotle himself was able to make his way through the *Nicomachean Ethics*, thought by many to be the master work in the field, without any explicit theory of conscience at all.³ He does, though, have a great deal to say on topics relevant to our purpose,⁴ and the first part of this article provides an explication of Aristotle’s views on those topics. The second part raises a series of questions regarding conscience generally, questions suggested by the material presented in the first part, and offers “Aristotelian responses” to the questions, also based on considerations developed in the first. The third part is an extended plea for clarity. Material from St. Thomas could be employed toward a similar end, but owing to its Scholastic form (no criticism intended), Aristotle’s treatment

² See: Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Williams is critical of both Plato and Aristotle for having distorted the concept of conscience, but argues that our contemporary understanding runs straight back through the Greeks reaching to the Heroic Period.

³ St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox, 1993) is almost line-by-line and by far the best there is.

⁴ Michael Simon John Ashfield, “Aristotelian Contributions to the Concept of a Conscience” (master’s thesis, Utrecht University, 2019). Ashfield argues that, in Aristotle, *phronēsis* plays a role similar to that of conscience. To the same point, see Nalan Sarac, “A Study on Conscience: The Content and Function” (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2016).

is more helpful in making clear the reason for and importance of the questions raised.⁵ The ultimate purposes of this article are, first, to place the reader in a position to make a thorough assessment of the adequacy of any definition of conscience with respect to the purposes for which that definition is employed and, second, to show the serious moral obligation to eliminate any unclarity regarding that meaning.

Aristotelian Topics Related to Conscience

“Spiritual exercises . . . have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any disordered attachment,” writes St. Ignatius of Loyola.⁶

The Good and Agency

The idea of the good is the fundamental concept in all moral thinking, and so deserves consideration at the outset.

The opening sentence of Aristotle’s *Ethics* provides a likely candidate for the most famous sentence in Western philosophy: “Every craft and every inquiry, and similarly [every] action and reflective choice, seems to aim at some good, and therefore they have rightly said that the good is what all seek.”⁷ By “all” Aristotle means all natural agents. Such agents belong to one of four kinds: rational animals, non-rational animals, plants, and inanimate bodies. That the first two are agents no one would deny, but plants grow and their cells divide, and inanimate bodies do things as well. Molecules are called agents or reagents, and material bodies attract one another. According to Aristotle, all natural agents are agents because their agency is directed toward some good.

⁵ See H. Ramsey, “Conscience: Aquinas—With a Hint of Aristotle,” *Sophia* 40 (2001): 15–29. Ramsey is principally interested in Aquinas but wishes to show Aquinas’s Aristotelian lineage. For Aristotle’s general influence on the medieval period regarding conscience, see Timothy Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁶ All quotations from Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* come from *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, n.d.).

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author’s, and further citations of the *Ethics* or other classical works will be found in parentheses in main text by book, chapter, and line. The author’s preferred published translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, because of its accuracy and notes, is that of C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2014). Aquinas’s *Commentary* and Reeve’s translation and notes together will take the reader rather far.

Agency and Nature

To understand the good, we must understand its foundation and source: nature.

Natural agents are agents directed toward various goods because they possess natures which are themselves directed toward those goods. Aristotle begins book II of the *Physics* with a discussion of nature defined as “a beginning point and cause of being in motion and at rest of a thing in which [the nature] is first and from itself” (2.1.192b21–22). Nature is an internal principle of movement and coming to rest, and the expression “first and from itself” serves to define the kind of internality Aristotle has in mind. Most inanimate things we observe around us do not themselves have natures, but they are composed of things which have them, and the former do what they do because of what the latter do owing to their natures. The key idea is that all agency we see in the world is ultimately reducible to the natures of things, for things without natures are agents only in a secondary sense. Without natures aimed at precise goods, there is no agency, and without agency there is no change, no movement, no coming to rest.

Agency and Sin (Hamartia)

If all natures are aimed at a good and all agents and actions seek a good, we need to understand why they fail to attain the good at which they aim.

Failures of agents in their actions occur for different reasons, and this article will consider many of them. The first distinction to be drawn is between actions that fail because of interference from something external to themselves which causes them to fail (simple failures) and actions that fail because of something awry in themselves (flawed actions). Flawed or off-target actions are flawed in themselves and at the time of their performance and do not await their actual outcomes for their determination. This distinction may be captured by contrasting a well struck golf ball blown off course by a sudden gust of wind with a ball sliced by a duffer. The former is a simple failure, whereas the latter is flawed. We might say of any flawed action, “if you want to achieve this goal, that is not the way to do it.”

The Greek verb *hamartanō* means “to miss the mark” (as when casting a spear at a target) or generally “to fail of one’s purpose, go wrong.”⁸ Its cognate noun, *hamartia*, means “a missing of the mark” (or target) or

⁸ Worth noting in this connection is the derivation of “wrong” from the Indo-European root *wir-*, meaning a kind of turning or twisting, as do other words from the same root, such as “wire,” “awry,” “weird,” “warp,” “wraith,” “torque,” “distort.” In contrast, *right*, *straight*, *regulate*, *rule*, *rex* derive from the root, *reg-*, generally meaning *straight*.

simply “an error, a sin.” Both Greek words are formed from the prefix *a-* or *ha-* functioning like the English *un-* plus a root derived from the noun *meros* meaning “a part, share, portion.” The etymological meaning of *hamartanō*, then, is “to act in such a way that the act lacks a share,” and *hamartia* means “an act lacking a share.”⁹ But a share of what? Of the good at which the action aims. Since every agent and agency and act is directed toward a good, to “lack a share” is to be missing a share in the good at which the action is directed, the action’s target or goal. To engage in an act covered by *hamartanō* is to perform one that does not share in the good aimed at by the act.

Standard usages of the Greek verb and noun extend to both simple failures and flawed actions indiscriminately. Neither the well struck ball blown off course nor the ball sliced by the duffer share in the end toward which both swings were directed, but Aristotle uses the terms to refer exclusively to flawed actions and not to simple failures (*Ethics* 5.8.1135b16–19). Although both miss their target, the latter do share in their good in an important respect: they are not portionless, because they remain the correct actions to perform to achieve the good at which they aim. “If you want to achieve this goal, that is the way to do it.”

Every action of a natural agent is an actualization or “activation” (*energeia*; literally a “working within”) of a being capable of acting in a determinate way in virtue of its nature. Thus, an off-target action is not simply flawed with respect to its end, but is also the flawed actualization of an agent liable to the performance of flawed actions. In contrast, a simple failure, not being a flawed action, is not the flawed actualization of the agent. Since actions are the actualizations of their agents, the agent who performs an action that fails to attain its end but not because of any flaw in it also shares in the good at which the action aims in a way the performer of the off-target act does not. We will see the significance of this point later in the second part.

Hamartia is typically translated as “sin,” which as a noun means “an act which is regarded as a transgression of the divine law and an offence against God,” and by extension “a violation of some standard of taste or propriety.” This definition in no way entails the meaning of *hamartia* employed by Aristotle. An offense against some principle or standard is not necessarily an act so structured as not to conduce to the attainment of its end. Turning right on a red light in front of a traffic sign forbidding

⁹ See the 1940 edition of Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

such maneuvers is no doubt a sin, but need not be flawed with respect to the act's and agent's end.

Off-Target Acts and the Goods They Miss; the Unique Good

Obviously, there are different goods for differently aimed actions. And if there are different goods at which actions aim, the harm of missing those goods will vary depending on the significance of the good missed. We need to know the good aimed at in order to assess correctly the harm occasioned by being off-target in any particular instance.

In the *Ethics* Aristotle focuses on one unique good preeminent over all others for every agent possessing a human nature.¹⁰ He calls this good *eudaimonia*, a term he takes to be roughly equivalent to "the human good," "living well," and "doing well" (1.2.1094b7; 1.4.1095a18–19), and typically translated as "happiness." Aristotle acknowledges that these expressions do not take us very far, but he sets as necessary conditions for any adequate account of what he means by *eudaimonia* that it be (1) pursued for its own sake, (2) never chosen for the sake of anything else, (3) sufficient in itself and lacking nothing, (4) not one good among others, and (5) not made better by the addition of any other good (1.7.1097a30–b20).

Since nature is an internal starting-point of action and rest and all actions aim at a good, all actions performed by human agents may properly be assessed as on- or off-target with respect to the end toward which human nature as such is directed, *eudaimonia*, regardless of what a particular human agent happens to be aiming at or thinking about at the time. Because of its primacy and centrality, *eudaimonia* provides the first standard by which all human actions can be assessed as on- or off-target. Of course, there are degrees of being off-target in this respect, but no such off-target action may properly be ignored, and the effects of some are devastating. Morality is the exercise of human reason principally regarding human happiness and what actions are on- or off-target with respect to it. This article is exclusively a moral treatise: whatever the variable end at play in a particular human action, that action and its end are viewed in light of their relationship to *eudaimonia*.

¹⁰ See Paul Strohm, *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Strohm does not focus on any particular good, but his book is rich in examples drawn from literature, politics, and everyday human situations to show the breadth of conscience's scope.

Distinguishing On- from Off-Target Actions with Respect to Eudaimonia

From what has been said, it seems clear that distinguishing correctly between on- and off-target actions with respect to *eudaimonia* is a matter of the greatest importance.

Each kind of natural being by virtue of its nature is aimed at its distinctive good (*ergon*; literally “work” and often translated “function”; *Ethics* 1.7.1097b24–33) and possesses by virtue of this same nature the ability to discover and achieve it. “Each [animal] discovers the good for itself as [it does its] food” (10.2.1172b13–14). The rational animal is no exception. We possess the natural abilities to know what the good of happiness is and to distinguish actions that are on-target from those that are off-target with respect to it. One of those abilities is the ability to reason, to draw inferences regarding the truth of some statement from the assumed truths of other statements. The perfect form of such inferences is the Aristotelian syllogism: “Since (1) all animals are mortal and (2) all men are animals, then (3) all men are mortal.” When reasoning relates to determining the right action to perform, its form is called the “practical syllogism”: “Since (1) generosity is on-target with respect to (and sometimes required by) *eudaimonia*, and (2) this act under consideration in these circumstances is a generous act, (3) this act under consideration in these circumstances is on-target with respect to (and perhaps here required by) *eudaimonia*.” The first premise asserts that a given kind of act is on- or off-target with respect to *eudaimonia*. The second premise asserts that the action under consideration in its circumstances falls within the scope of the general kind of act referred to in the universal statement. If Aristotle is right that “each animal discovers the good for itself as it does its food,” then the rational animal will be able to discover its own natural good by its own natural power, which is nothing other than the abilities to recognize the necessity contained in the form of the practical syllogism (its validity), discover the truth of each of its premises, and employ its conclusions properly as a guide for action.

Recognition of the necessity contained in the form of the syllogism poses no difficulty, since no rational animal disputes (or would dare dispute) it. Acquiring the abilities to know the truth of either of the premises in a syllogistic argument is a different matter. What follows is a brief sketch.

The natural ability of the rational animal to discover its own natural good is its ability to acquire and employ intellectual virtues, acquired features of the rational soul “by which we recognize the truth [here, of one of the two premises of the syllogism] and do not make mistakes” (*Ethics*

6.6.1141a3–4). The intellectual power and its perfection (virtue) by which we know the truth of first premises like “generosity is on-target with respect to *eudaimonia*” Aristotle calls “comprehension” (*nous*), “[being the comprehension or grasp] of starting-points” (6.6.1141a7–8), and it is acquired by the process of “induction” (*Posterior Analytics* 2.19).¹¹ It arrives ultimately at the possession of the ability to recognize that a good (e.g., generosity) is a good internal to *eudaimonia* itself, a component of full happiness. The process of “induction” through which “comprehension” is acquired is often a long and arduous one.

The intellectual virtue by which we know the truth of second premises like “this act under consideration in these circumstances is a generous act” Aristotle calls “practical wisdom” or “prudence” (*phronēsis*), the ability “to deliberate well about the things good and beneficial for himself, not with regard to some particular aspect, such as what things contribute to health or strength, but what [contribute] to living well generally” (*Ethics* 6.5.1140a26–28). As is the case with comprehension, the acquisition of prudence is long and laborious (6.8.1142a13–16, a19–20, a26–27).

Cognitive Obstacles to Correct Discernment

Because of the manifest importance of distinguishing correctly between sound and flawed actions with respect to *eudaimonia*, we must never disregard potential obstacles to attaining correct judgment in order that we might avoid or overcome them if possible.

Common experience testifies to the difficulties we sometimes face when attempting to decide the right action to perform in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. These difficulties arise from (1) the multiplicity of factors upon which sound judgment depends and (2) our limited abilities to discern each one correctly and (3) bring the multiplicity into a correctly systematized whole. We may miss important factors, be mistaken or unsure about the truth regarding each, or fail to weigh each of them against the others in a proper fashion.

We do not need Aristotle to tell us how difficult distinguishing on- from off-target actions can sometimes be, but given this article’s subject, it will be helpful to be aware of how often and with what force Aristotle insists on that difficulty in the *Ethics*:

¹¹ St. Thomas calls this power *synderesis*. For a nice history of the relationship between conscience (*conscientia* from the Greek *syneidesis*) and *synderesis*, see Douglas C. Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues: From Bonaventure to MacIntyre* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001).

Noble and just things . . . possess such great variation and irregularity as to seem to be matters of convention only and not of nature. (1.3.1094b14–16)

Matters relating to action and beneficial things have nothing that holds firm any more than in matters of health. (2.2.1104a3–5)

There are many ways of being off-target—for evil belongs to what lacks limit, as the Pythagoreans put it, and good to what possesses limit—but only one for being correct, so that the one is easy, the other difficult, easy to miss the target, difficult to hit it. (2.6.1106b28–33)

Moral virtue lies in a middle condition . . . because it is skilled at hitting a mean in emotions and actions; . . . therefore its function is something excellent. In each case there is work [encountered] in grasping the middle, such that [finding] the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for the one who knows. Thus, to get angry is for anybody and easy, as is giving or spending money, but for whom and how much and when and for what purpose and how, no longer is this easy and for everybody, so that to do this well is something rare and worthy of praise and a lovely-good [*kalon*]. (2.9.1109a20–30)

The person deviating somewhat from the good is not blamed, whether in excess or deficiency, but the one [deviating] significantly . . . for this individual does not escape notice. But at what point and to what degree he is blameworthy is not easy to determine with a [general] account, nor in any other matter of perception. Such topics involve particulars and judgment is a matter of perception. (2.9.1109b8–23)

Non-Cognitive Obstacles to Correct Discernment—Pleasure and Pain

The complexity of the subject and our inherent cognitive limitations together pose such obstacles to the discovery of truth that it can be something “rare and worthy of praise and a lovely-good.” But other features pose obstacles to correct discrimination and we need to consider them as well.

As significant as the considerations regarding purely cognitive factors may be, a perhaps even more important and powerful source of ignorance arises separate from them: our feelings of pleasure and pain—“Whatever

sort each one is, such does the good appear to him" (*Ethics* 3.5.1114a32–b1). Aristotle uses the expression "whatever sort (or kind) each one is" (*hōpoios pot' hekastos esti*) to refer to the various "states" (*hexeis*) in which a human being may be. He defines a state as a quality of the soul "according to which we stand well or ill with reference to emotions" (2.5.1105b25–26), and observes that a sign of a person's states is "the pleasure or pain supervening upon actions" (2.3.1104b4–5). A person's states are dispositions to feel emotions in a characteristic way, and every emotion possesses either a pleasant or a painful tone. These emotional pleasures and pains supervening upon our actions are the pleasures and pains we take in performing those actions. In contrast, bodily pleasures and pains arising from our external senses do not, in Aristotle's sense, supervene upon our actions; rather, when we perform certain actions, their bodily pleasures and pains seize or find us. Human beings are not good or bad owing to their bodily pleasures and pains because these arise directly from our common nature and are roughly uniform across our species. Rather, Aristotle calls virtuous or good those humans who stand well with reference to their emotions, being inclined to feel emotions (and thus emotional pleasures and pains) appropriately, at the right time, toward the right person, in the right circumstances, to the right degree, and so on (2.6.1106b16–23). He calls vicious or bad those who stand badly with respect to their emotions (and thus to their emotional pleasures and pains), people who are inclined to feel emotions inappropriately, either excessively or deficiently.

"Emotions are whatever [feelings] (1) in virtue of which men as they change [with respect to their emotions also] change regarding [their] judgments, and (2) upon which follow pain and pleasure" (*Rhetoric* 2.1.1378a21–22).¹² This is a vital point for Aristotle, as implied in his remark quoted earlier: "Whatever sort each one is, such does the good appear to him." Our emotions and the states from which they arise have a powerful influence on what we judge to be good and what we judge to be bad. If we stand well with reference to our emotions, we can hope to see truly; if not, our ability to see correctly and thus to live well and do well is at risk of being seriously compromised. Aristotle therefore assigns a central role to both bodily and emotional pleasure and pain in the conduct of our lives:

Because of pleasure we do bad [*phaula*; paltry or foul] things,
because of pain we hold off from things that are lovely-good, and

¹² See also Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 9, a. 2.

therefore it is necessary to be brought up in a certain way right from youth, as Plato says, to rejoice in and be grieved by the things we ought. . . . Through pleasures and pains people become bad [*phauloi*] by pursuing and fleeing these. . . . [Moral] virtue is assumed to be productive of the best things regarding pleasures and pains, badness [vice] the opposite. . . . [Regarding the true and correct objects worthy of choice and the true and correct objects worthy of avoidance,] the good man sees correctly [*kathorthōtikos*; right-seeing, on-target], the bad man off-target [*hamartēmatikos*], especially concerning pleasure. It is common to animals, and it follows along with all [objects of] choice, and the lovely-good and the beneficial [the two objects of pursuit in addition to pleasure] appear pleasant. Also, [pleasure] grows up with us all from youth. Therefore, it is difficult for this feeling to be rubbed out, having been engrained with life. And we measure [*kanonizomen*; canonize] actions, some [people] more, some less, by pleasure and pain. Because of this, it is necessary for these matters to be [our] entire concern. It is no small matter regarding actions to rejoice and to grieve well or ill. . . . For this reason, the whole concern for [moral] virtue and political [study or virtue is about these]. The individual employing them [using them as a guide] well will be good, the one badly, bad. (*Ethics* 2.31104b9–1105a13)

We call temperance [*sōprosunēn*] by this name as preserving prudence [*sōzousan tēn phronēsin*]. It preserves this assumption [about the end or starting-point]. The pleasant and the painful neither destroy nor distort every assumption, such as whether the triangle does or does not have two right angles, but [they do destroy and distort] concerning those regarding what is to be done. The starting-points of things doable [actions] are that on account of which they are done [their ends]. To the person destroyed utterly by pleasure or pain, the starting-point does not appear straight [correctly], nor that it is necessary on account of this [end] and for this [end] to choose and do everything. Vice is destructive of the [correct] starting-point. (6.5.1140b11–20)

In summary, beyond the cognitive difficulties posed to correct judgment by the complexity of the subject and the cognitive limitations of our human nature, the pleasure and pain of our emotions (as well as those of our external senses) are primed to bring about serious distortions in

our judgments regarding actions and their relation to *eudaimonia*. The catastrophic result is that human beings of ordinary intelligence might easily recognize many widely controverted truths were their thinking not confused by distorting bodily and emotional pleasures and pains. To illustrate, think of the case of slavery and slaveholders.

Off-Target Actions and Guilt

Since actions can be off-target with respect to *eudaimonia*, the related issue of guilt surfaces: can an agent be held responsible and blamed for being off-target, and if so, what is the reason?

The question of guilt is related to the question of responsibility, and then to those of control and the voluntary, and then to those of force and ignorance. We speak of responsibility with respect to each of the four kinds of natural agents. We say that the hailstorm was responsible for the damaged crops, but we do not think of the hailstorm as guilty for the damage, nor one plant as guilty for having choked off the growth of another by its own growth. We may blame animals and very young children for behaviors we find unsuitable, and use punishment for such actions as an effective modifier of their misbehavior in a desired direction, but they are not guilty or blameworthy in the way adult humans are guilty and blameworthy.

In his treatment of voluntary action, Aristotle claims that normal adult humans possess a power different from those of other natural agents: adult humans are begetters or initiators of their actions, just as they are begetters of their children (*Ethics* 3.51113b18–19). It is “up to us” whether we act or do not act in a given way (3.5.1113b7–8). Non-rational animals act according to their nature; their actions are under their control (as are those of small children), but as agents they are themselves controlled by their nature and are incapable of acting against it. Adult rational animals, in virtue of their rationality, are capable of acting contrary to their nature; whether they do or not is up to them in a radically different way from what is the case in any non-rational agency.

Our actions are up to us when they are within our control, when they are voluntary. Such actions are performed when we are doing under given circumstances what we (1) know we are doing in those circumstances and (2) want to be doing in those circumstances. Thus, control of our actions can be lost owing to the presence of either ignorance or force, though neither one by itself makes for the involuntary. Force may be exerted while we remain free to refuse to comply. Force is an important factor in the consideration of the involuntary, but our concern here is solely with ignorance.

The reason that ignorance may not cause our actions to be involuntary

is that the ignorance itself may be something up to us; the cause of our ignorance may be traceable to our will, and thus voluntary and something for which we are responsible and perhaps culpable and blameworthy. We can be begetters of our ignorance in the same way as we are begetters of our children and our actions. We are responsible for our ignorance when it results from laziness (too much trouble), negligence (insufficient care), overconfidence (excessive pride in our abilities), and other causes. These are common occurrences in human life, and their occurrence is something up to us.

Pleasure/Pain and Guilt

If indeed (1) we can be blamed for at least some of our off-target actions, and if (2) pleasures and pains can cause our actions to be off-target, the question naturally arises regarding the connection between the two. Can pleasures and pains play a role in the performance of blameworthy actions, and if so, what would that role be?

We have seen that “the starting-points of things doable [actions] are that on account of which they are done.” “To the person destroyed utterly by pleasure or pain, the starting-point does not appear straight, nor that it is necessary on account of this and for this to choose and do everything. Vice is destructive of the starting-point.” Now, all this would be merely a matter of very bad luck, worthy of deep and sincere commiseration, were our states (including vice) not up to us, but they are, at least in many cases. Aristotle does not descend to matters of detail in distinguishing instances of responsibility and non-responsibility, but he occasionally mentions the classes of madmen, foreigners (who presumably have been raised and instructed improperly), and those diseased or otherwise maimed (*Ethics* 7.1.1445a31–32; 7.3.1147a13–14). We can easily see that the distinction between responsible and not responsible represents a continuum, and we are not interested in setting forth general rules, but Aristotle makes clear that we can be responsible for ignorance resulting from bodily pleasures and pains and from distorted emotions. “Through pleasures and pains people become bad by pursuing and fleeing these.” We can become arrogant by too much pursuit of the emotional pleasure of being shown to be right and too much avoidance of the emotional pain of being corrected, as we can become intemperate by too much pursuit of the bodily pleasure of food and too much avoidance of the bodily pain of self-denial. And if (1) the distorted emotions belonging to the states of arrogance and intemperance further distort perception of the true good, and thus bring about ignorance of what is to be done, and if (2) the possession of these states is

something up to us, then (3) our ignorance arising from these about what is to be done is also something up to us, and therefore something for which we are responsible and blameworthy.

“The saying that no one is willingly knavish [*ponēros*; morally worthless] nor unwillingly blessed seems to be true in one respect and false in another. No one is unwillingly blessed, but wickedness [*mochthērios*; depravity] is [or at least can be] voluntary” (3.5.1113b14–17). Aristotle begins his argument by observing that citizens are punished for committing illegal acts arising from ignorance of a feature of the law they should have known and was not difficult to know (3.5.1113b33–35), and in these cases ignorance seems to arise from mere carelessness. But some lawbreaker might object in his own defense that this is simply the way he is (i.e., *hopoios*; of what kind, of what sort), a careless person, always was, always will be. Aristotle is not buying:

But people themselves become the causes of their being such, living carelessly. And so for the unjust and the intemperate, the ones doing bad things, the others spending time in drinking and the like. In each case it is actions which make for certain sorts [of states or people]. This is clear from those preparing for any contest or engagement. They persevere practicing [*energountes*; energizing]. To be ignorant that states regarding each subject arise from [the corresponding] energizing is the mark of someone utterly senseless [*anaithētou*; anaesthetized]. Still, it is irrational for the one committing injustice not to wish to be unjust, or the one performing intemperate actions not to [wish to] be intemperate. If someone not unknowingly performs actions from which he will be unjust, he would be unjust voluntarily. (3.5.1114a4–13).

It is true that no one directly seeks to be vicious, for vice “destroys utterly” the true end, causes us to be mistaken about what *eudaimonia* really is (6.5.1140b16–20; 7.8.1151a15–26). But the condition of vice is not thereby rendered involuntary owing to a lack of direct aim. Rather, the agent’s reason and desire are operative but not directly. The agent performing a wrongful, vice-inducing action in the situation facing him *prefers* Package A (performance of the vice-inducing act + its immediate attendant pleasure + the state of vice’s coming to be) *over* Package B (non-performance of the vice-inducing act + foregoing the immediate attendant pleasure + the state of vice’s not coming to be). Vice is not directly but preferentially voluntary, and its acquisition is thus under the

agent's control. He could have avoided his vicious condition simply by not performing the vice-inducing action(s), but he preferred their performance because of the associated bodily or emotional pleasures. And the same holds true for disordered emotional conditions other than vice. If someone (1) knowingly performs (or refrains from performing) certain actions, and (2) can reasonably foresee that, from these performances or instances of refraining, he will become emotionally disordered in some way, then (3) he will be emotionally disordered in that way voluntarily. Also voluntary will be any ignorance arising from his emotional distortions, and the flawed nature of the *hamartia* resulting from that ignorance, and finally the harm caused by that act. The principle Aristotle employs is that of "voluntary in cause": the foreseeable result of a cause that is itself under the agent's control is also under his control. "To be ignorant that states regarding each subject arise from a certain type of activity is the mark of someone utterly anesthetized."

The practical syllogism is a valid pattern of reasoning. If its premises are both true, its conclusion must be true, and the action that follows in accord with that conclusion will be on-target with reference to the true good. "Since generosity is on-target with respect to *eudaimonia* and this act under consideration in these circumstances is a generous act, this act under consideration in these circumstances is on-target with respect to *eudaimonia*." But if either of the premises of any practical syllogism is false, the action resulting from it lacks proper guidance and is almost certainly off-target. Aristotle defines vice as the condition of the soul in which the true end is "destroyed" by distorted emotions, either excessive or deficient. The premise whose correct recognition is first and principally destroyed by vice is the premise marking the end (good) or the anti-end (bad). If these matters generally are such that ignorance regarding them is a "mark of someone utterly senseless," then that ignorance is, at least in principle, voluntary and blameworthy, and thus causes the off-target acts resulting from it to be blameworthy as well. At stake here is *eudaimonia*, and not only for ourselves.

In addition to the complexity of moral matters and the cognitive limitations inherent in our nature, another major source of error lies in our disposition to be guided by our sensual pleasures and pains and by our emotional ones, however distorted they may be. And though we are not responsible for the first two conditions because they are not up to us, we can be and often are responsible for the third. They all make for sin, the third for guilt.

Further Obstacles to Correct Discernment

To be told that acquisition of the intellectual virtues of comprehension and prudence will be of great help in distinguishing correctly between on- and off-target actions with respect to *eudaimonia*, and that there exist established and clearly marked-out steps that can be taken to acquire them, is indeed great news. We have seen that their acquisition is time-consuming and laborious, but at least the path before us is well lit. Is there anything else needing to be said?

We have already touched on this subject, but it is worthy of a more thorough consideration from Aristotle's *Ethics*.

States come about from similar actions [*homoion energeiōn*; energizings]. Because of this it is necessary to exhibit actions of distinctive kinds [*energeias poias*]. States follow from [actions] according to [the actions'] differences. It matters not a little to be habituated immediately from birth in this or in that, but very much, or rather, the entire [difference]. (2.1.1103b21–25)

If arguments were sufficient for making people equitable [*epieikeis*], they would justly carry off many and great rewards, according to Theognis, and it would be necessary to provide them [rewards, many and great]. But now, they seem to be effective enough to urge on and stimulate the more liberal [*eleutherious*; proper to self-directed human beings] of the young people and to produce a character noble-minded and truly loving the lovely-good and ready to be possessed by virtue, but to be unable to encourage the many toward the-lovely-and-the-good [*kalokagathian*; a nearly untranslatable term conveying the Greek ideal of an excellent citizen] who by their nature are disposed to obey not shame but fear. Nor do they hold off from base things because of the dishonorable, but because of punishment. Living by passion, they pursue their congenial pleasures and the things through which [their pleasures] will come and flee the opposing pains. Of the lovely-good and the truly pleasant they have no conception, lacking any taste [of or for them]. What argument could be such as to refashion [reform, amend] them? For it is not possible or at least not easy to change by argument the things long ago left thoroughly seized [*kateilēmmena*; the neuter accusative plural of the perfect passive participle of the verb *katalambanō* ("to seize thoroughly"), and so "having been thoroughly seized before

and remaining thoroughly seized still”] within [people’s] dispositions [characters]. (10.9.1179b4–18)

Argument and teaching are not effective with all, but it is necessary that the soul of the hearer have been thoroughly prepared [or worked] beforehand in his states so as to rejoice and hate in a lovely-good way as earth [must be prepared beforehand] for nourishing the seed. The person living according to his emotions would not hear the argument turning him away from [his pleasures], nor would he even understand. How could it be possible to change by persuasion someone settled in this way? Generally, passion does not seem to obey reason, but force. It is necessary, then, that there preexist a character in some way at home [*oikeion*; home-like] with virtue, feeling affection for the lovely-good and unable to endure the shameful. It is difficult to hit upon correct upbringing right from youth unless fostered under laws of a particular sort, for to live temperately (regarding pleasures) and patiently (regarding pains) is not welcome to the many, and especially to the young. Therefore, it is necessary that upbringing and common practices be set in order by laws. Things to which one is accustomed are not painful. But perhaps it is not sufficient to chance upon correct upbringing and oversight while still young, but it is necessary for those having attained adulthood to engage in these same things and to be accustomed in them. And, for these things, we need laws, and generally throughout one’s whole life. The many obey-as-under-command [*peitharchousi*] necessity [force] rather than reason, and punishment rather than the lovely-good. Therefore, some people believe that it is necessary for lawgivers to exhort [citizens to moral] virtue and to urge on for the sake of the lovely-good, as having already been brought in their character to attend adequately to the things they will hear. (10.9.1179b23–1180a8; cf. 10.9.1180a14–29, b7–28)

And finally, a quotation asserting the inseparability of the intellectual and moral virtues, and by implication the difficulty confronting the acquisition of either:

From what has been said it is not possible to be fully good [possessing the moral virtues] without prudence or to be prudent [or to possess comprehension, for that matter] without moral

virtue. . . . It is clear . . . that reflective desire¹³ will not be correct without prudence or without [moral] virtue, for the one [moral] virtue, as it establishes and maintains an undistorted emotional environment for the two intellectual virtues to operate correctly] sets [us] to act for the [correct] goal, the other [prudence] for the things [actions] appropriate for that goal.” (6.13.1144b30–32; 6.13.1145a4–6)

Questions to Be Addressed to Those Discussing Conscience¹⁴

“FIRST PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION: Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. . . . Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. . . . Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we were created,” writes St. Ignatius of Loyola again in his *Spiritual Exercises*.

Although Aristotle has no explicit theory of conscience, an examination of his views on related subjects permits us to propose Aristotelian answers to the following questions inspired by a consideration of those views. The significance of these questions will become clear as the interrogation unfolds.

Nature of Conscience?

In the opening of Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates offers a master class in the dialectical search for definitions (447b–455d, esp. 447b–c, 448d–449a, 453b–c, 454b–c). In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle observes that Socrates was the first of the Greek philosophers to have turned his attention to the topic of definition, which Aristotle calls the “starting-point of knowledge [or science]” (13.4.1078b27–30; cf. 1.6.987b1–4). Without a clear definition of the topic under discussion, we run the risk of not knowing what we are talking about. Asking someone discussing conscience to explain precisely

¹³ *Proairesis*, typically translated “choice,” is the thoughtful desire that arises from drawing the conclusion of a practical syllogism. When the syllogism and reflective desire regard *eudaimonia*, then that reflective desire serves as the best available analogue for Aristotelian conscience. Treatment of *proairesis* is found in *Ethics* 3.2.

¹⁴ See Richard Sorabji, *Moral Conscience Through the Ages: Fifth Century BCE to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). At the end of his book Sorabji lists thirteen features of conscience he believes can be inferred from his historical survey. Many of his features parallel the questions that follow.

what he means by the term is therefore always appropriate and sometimes necessary. In this way, we will know what he thinks his subject is.

Question: *The Genus of Conscience.* Is it a power all human beings possess by nature? Or is it a non-natural power possessed by some or all humans from a source outside their nature? Or is it not an active power at all, but merely an effect (like a seemingly spontaneous thought) caused by some external agent? If conscience is not possessed by or bestowed on all human beings, why is this and what can be said of those who lack it? *The Specific Difference of Conscience:* Depending upon how the question of its genus is answered, how precisely does conscience differ from other powers or effects of the same general kind?

Aristotelian response: A complete definition of conscience cannot be provided without an appeal to the structure of the rational soul, but we can begin by calling conscience the exercise of the power of reason¹⁵ by which the rational animal acquires and employs authoritative guidance for his actions encompassing all areas of his life.¹⁶ The nature of this guidance is the judgment that the performance of a particular action, under the circumstances, is or is not properly directed toward *eudaimonia* as the agent understands it.

Mistaken Conscience?

Knowing whether conscience can or cannot be mistaken is important. If it can, we will need to know whether and how mistakes may be detected and corrected. The mere possibility of a mistake will introduce further areas worthy of attention regarding its causes, the possibility of their being overcome, possible harms of mistakes, possible culpability for mistakes, and so on.

Question: Is a person acting according to his conscience necessarily acting correctly, or is it possible he might be mistaken in his judgment?

Aristotelian response: Each animal discovers its own good as it does its own food. For this to occur, (1) the animal must possess a correctness in

¹⁵ For conscience's belonging to all rational animals, see C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955).

¹⁶ For the feature of authoritative guidance, see: James F. Childress, "Appeals to conscience," *Ethics* 89 (1979): 315–35; J. David Velleman, "The Voice of Conscience," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999): 57–76.

its desire, the object desired must be what truly is food for the animal and truly beneficial to it, and (2) the pursuit itself must be appropriate to attaining its object. The mere pursuing of a target labeled “food” by any chance means is manifestly insufficient. Note that conscience was first defined as the mere ability to provide a particular form of guidance, but its function, as that of anything else, is always in terms of some particular good. Thus, an improved definition will appeal to the function of conscience, the provision of correct guidance toward real *eudaimonia*, and for that to occur beliefs about what *eudaimonia* is and what actions are conducive to its being achieved must be true.

Mistaken Conscience and Sin?

We see here again the importance of possessing an adequate definition of conscience. If we have no clear understanding of what it is, we are in no position to know what sin, an off-target or flawed action with respect to a good, might be, and indeed whether sin is even possible.

Question: If the function of conscience is to direct actions toward achieving a distinctive end or good, does it follow that the act resulting from mistaken conscience is itself flawed with respect to its end and therefore a sin?

Aristotelian response: Any action resulting from the employment of a practical syllogism having a false premise is both a flawed action and typically a flawed actualization of the rational agent. This principle holds regarding all ends, but its application in the special case of *eudaimonia* requires a qualification best explained after the harm of a mistaken conscience has been examined and in connection with the treatment of guilt.

Obstacles to the Acquisition of True Beliefs?

If conscience can be mistaken, and the immediate cause of a mistake is the presence of false beliefs regarding either premise of the practical syllogism, we will then want to know the possible sources of false beliefs. We may find that these sources turn out to be, individually or collectively, difficult to overcome, so that action from mistaken conscience might in fact be rather common and action from correct conscience be something “rare and worthy of praise and a lovely-good.”

Question: Since the correct functioning of conscience requires possession of and action upon true beliefs, are there frequently encountered obstacles

to their acquisition? If there are, what are they, how serious are they, and how difficult to avoid or overcome?

Aristotelian response: Common to all members of the human species are three serious obstacles to the acquisition of true beliefs regarding the premises of the practical syllogism: (1) the complexity of the topic of correct moral action itself; (2) cognitive limitations proper to our species; (3) the near universal tendency to assess actions in terms of their associated pleasures and pains. “In all things pleasure and what brings pleasure must especially be guarded against. We do not judge of it as unbribed [judges]” (*Ethics* 2.9.1109b7–9).¹⁷

One variable within the human species Aristotle does not mention in this context is the level of the ability to think and reason in a particular individual. This is not a matter merely of pure intelligence, but also of one’s education and emotional states. A second variable is the amount of experience a person has acquired, either directly or indirectly, about matters relating to moral action generally and to the specific topic at issue. Aristotle stresses two others: the manner of life already lived, especially the states acquired by previous actions (1.4.5.1095b4–16), and the degree to which the individual assesses proposed actions using the associated bodily or emotional pleasures and pains as their measure (2.3.1105a3–5).

Just as anyone can place a point within the circumference of a circle, so any normal human can act from conscience, but to find the correct action regarding *eudaimonia*, as to find the center of a circle, is not for everyone but for the knower (or at least the correct believer). Precisely here does the possession of the intellectual virtues of comprehension and prudence become crucial, and we have seen that the difficulties in their acquisition are myriad.

Conscience and Goods Additional to Eudaimonia?

This seeming digression is necessary in contexts where considerations regarding the supernatural, something above or in addition to human nature, are introduced. A somewhat lengthy analysis is necessary to elicit the general considerations that must be kept in mind here.

¹⁷ To quote Upton Sinclair: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it” (*I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994]).

Question: Since conscience has a function and a good by nature, might there be additional goods at which it aims? If so, what are they and how do they arise?

Aristotelian response: Each nature is intimately joined with the distinctive good toward which it is ordered, so that the rational animal is distinguished as the natural being ordered to the good of *eudaimonia*. Furthermore, the fundamental contours of *eudaimonia* are knowable by natural human reason when it is employed appropriately. The suggestion that *eudaimonia*, the human good, could in principle be expanded or modified with considerations not available to human reason merits careful attention.

“Nature” is used in many senses. Employing the term as defined at the outset of this article and used throughout, Aristotle claims that all things possessing natures are substances, “for the underlying thing is something and the nature is ever within the underlying thing” (*Physics* 2.1.192b32–34). This implies that “possesses nature X” cannot meaningfully be said of an underlying subject, since its nature is an essential part of the very constitution of the underlying subject itself, and that subject does not exist without it (1.2.185a31–32). We say, “this rational animal is tall,” but if we say, “this is a rational animal,” the “this” or “this thing” or “this animal” must refer to what is ultimately the rational animal itself, for there is nothing else to which it can refer.

This implies that substances and only substances come to be “unconditionally,” whereas other things that can be said to come to be, such as a red color, require a change in a substance (1.7.190a31–b1). “Red comes to be” is an unusual way of saying: “an x [substance or substance-like thing] changes from being not-red to being red.” A red color comes to be not unconditionally, but only because something else—the substance—acquires the quality of red; a red color cannot come to be in any other way. It cannot come to be unconditionally.

This implies that a substance cannot become another substance. We might think that one substance becomes another substance, as “the flower becomes dead organic matter,” but according to Aristotle, what occurs is a corruption, an unconditioned ceasing to be of a prior substance followed instantaneously by a generation, an unconditioned coming to be, of a subsequent (5.1.225a12–20).

Natures are like individual substances. Natures are instances of a broad category of forms Aristotle calls “second substances,” to which “first substances” (individual substances in the world of nature) belong as to a

broader category (*Categories* 5.2a11–14). An individual first substance can belong to a natural kind (a “second substance”) that is slightly different from another natural kind, but it cannot slightly belong to a different natural kind or belong to two kinds. Natures or natural kinds differ from individual substances in that natures do not come to be or cease to be whereas individual substances do, but they are similar in that neither natures nor individual substances can change their kinds.

Each nature is fixed by the good to which it is ordered, and this implies that the good constitutive of a given nature cannot be modified without *ipso facto* constituting a new nature different from the original. We might call two hypothetical constituting goods for the rational animal *eudaimonia*-1 and *eudaimonia*-2, corresponding to two different natures *rational animal*-1 and *rational animal*-2. As such, a member of the first species cannot become a member of the second; rather, a member of the first is corrupted (unconditionally ceasing to exist) and a member of the second is generated (unconditionally coming to exist).

In summary, though “nature” is a term used in many senses, and “taking on a new nature” can be assigned various intelligible meanings, whatever meaning may be given to that expression and others like it, their meaning must be carefully observed and assessed with close attention to the meaning of *nature* employed by Aristotle and throughout this article.

Mistaken Conscience and Harm?

If mistaken actions arise from false beliefs, we also need to know how serious is the associated harm so that we could then know how much effort we should exert in order to avoid it. Knowing this, we can then determine the possibility and degree of guilt for a mistake. The greater the harm associated with acting on a mistaken conscience, (presumably) the greater the care that should be taken in assuring its correctness.

Question: Since conscience has the function of achieving a distinctive good, if a conscience is mistaken in a particular instance, such a mistaken conscience would seem to be associated with a distinctive harm—the loss of or failure to achieve that distinctive good. Is this inference correct?

Aristotelian response: We tend to think of “harm” as a bad or unfavorable consequence resulting from an act, and Aristotle employs this ordinary way of thinking, but he does not consider such harms to be the primary harms regarding rational animals and their nature. To understand Aristotle’s thinking on this point we need to grasp the distinction he draws between

what he calls “action” (*praxis*) and what he calls “production” or “making” (*poesis*). Production is rational behavior, the end or good of which is something different from and exterior to the productive behavior itself; the good of “action,” on the other hand, is nothing other than acting well, which is a good internal to the action itself. *Eudaimonia* is not primarily about achieving ends external to the actions themselves. “Good *praxis* itself is the end; it is *eudaimonia* at its core” (*Ethics* 6.5.1140b4–7).

The expressions “ordinary harm” and “primary harm” help to explain this point. Since the concept of *eudaimonia* is not that of a good numbered among other goods and cannot be made better by any additional good, it must include good productions and ordinary goods (pleasures, possessions, knowledge, health, reputation), but these are not its core (1.8.1098b18–20; 1.10.1100b33–1101a6). Since “good action is itself the end,” the primary goods of *eudaimonia* are nothing other than good actions themselves. One can imagine a human life filled with all the pleasures, honors, and possessions one could possibly want and completely lacking in any action arising from a correct employment of the practical syllogism with respect to *eudaimonia*. In contrast, one can imagine a life filled with major ordinary harms but in which the human agent always acts correctly. The former is obviously an utter failure, and while Aristotle acknowledges that the latter cannot rightly be called *eudaimonia*, still “in such [situations] the lovely-good shines forth when someone calmly endures many great pieces of bad fortune (stemming from sources outside his own will but perhaps from the choices of others) not from insensitivity [*analgēsian*; analgesic] to suffering, but owing to a noble mind and a great soul” (1.10.1100b30–33).

Regarding ordinary harms, the degree of harm obviously varies, but its existence and magnitude are manifestly independent of the rational agent’s belief regarding the correctness of his action. A fencer wielding a foil mistakenly believed to be blunted will as surely run his opponent through as he would have had he known the truth. Primary harms can also play a role in determining the sinfulness of an action, such as contributing to someone else’s voluntary wrongdoing, like sharing alcohol or narcotics with another, or presenting false moral teaching, perhaps having something to do with causing little ones to stumble.

Because of the harms both ordinary and primary caused by acting on a mistaken conscience, *to be indifferent to whether one’s conscience is correct is a paradigm of Aristotelian irrationality*.

A Digression: Always-and-Everywhere Wrongful Actions

The distinction between primary and ordinary goods and harms also serves to throw light on a controverted point not directly related to the topic of this article but nonetheless worth attending to here owing to its significance: the possible existence of always-and-everywhere wrongful actions. Aristotle certainly believes there are such, though he nowhere provides an explicit account of them. In his treatment of the involuntary owing to force, he maintains that whether one may be excused for having succumbed to force depends on the degree of evil threatened and the significance of the good deserving of protection, so that one may be excused for acquiescence if the evil threatened is greater (how much?) than the good at stake. But, to obviate a possible unwarranted inference, Aristotle immediately adds that “some [seemingly forced actions] perhaps cannot [correctly] be [said to be] forced, but rather the person must die suffering the most fearful [sufferings]” (*Ethics* 3.1.1110a26–27). And having defined moral virtue as a state lying in some middle ground between an excess of too much and a deficiency of too little, Aristotle again hastens to block a possible mistaken inference:

But not every action and every emotion admits of a middle, for some immediately upon being named are combined with badness, such as spite, shamelessness, envy, and regarding actions, adultery, theft, murder. All these and such like them are said to be bad in themselves but not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not ever possible regarding these things to set upright [*katorthoun*] but ever to be off-target [*hamartanein*]. (2.6.1107a8–15)

This passage has often been misunderstood owing to a confusion between a name and its definition, on the one hand, and the thing itself thus named, on the other. If we think in terms of the definitions of the names themselves, Aristotle would naturally seem to mean that their definitions contain something like “wrongful” or “excessive,” so that the necessity of the wrongfulness of the emotions or actions named would result from the definitions of the names employed. But that is not at all what Aristotle has in mind. He knows perfectly well how to distinguish the name and its definition from the thing itself (however denoted). “In emotions and in actions, it is for moral virtue to find the middle and to choose it. Therefore, according to the being [*tên ousian*] and according to the definition saying what it is [*ton logon ton to ti ên einai legonta*] moral virtue is a middle” (2.6.1107a6–7). What Aristotle means is that, however

the six emotions or actions are successfully denoted, the learner will recognize their badness, assuming no impeding natural or moral deficiencies. How one grasps the *ousia*, the thing itself rather than the name will be treated in step 3 below.¹⁸

Aristotle himself offers no argument for his belief in always-and-everywhere wrongful actions, but support can be derived by distinguishing primary from ordinary goods and harms and by appealing to the principle that “good action is itself the end.” An Aristotelian argument for the existence of always-and-everywhere wrongful actions might consist in the following three steps.

Step 1. Human nature and the human good have a structure. So do human actions. That is why Aristotle can say that “good action is itself the end.” It is good action because it is action appropriate to human nature and integral to *eudaimonia*. A bad action would be one inappropriate to human nature and subversive of *eudaimonia*. Bad action often brings about ordinary harms in addition to its primary harm, but it need not. As good action contains its good within itself, so a bad action contains its evil within itself, directly subversive of *eudaimonia* and thus demeaning its human agent without needing to cause any ordinary harms.

Step 2. The so-called “Dionysian Principle” (DP) establishes an important way to distinguish between good and bad action. “Good is from the one and total cause, evil however from many and particular defects.”¹⁹ A set of four tires is good if and only if all four tires are sound, whereas a set can be bad from any one of the four tires being defective. A whole is no better than its worst essential component. The DP is a universal principle, and it applies to human actions as much as it does to sets of tires. For an action to be an instance of good action, it must be found acceptable in all its essential (with respect to *eudaimonia*) features, whereas for an action to be an instance of bad action, a defect in a single essential feature will be enough to condemn it. To illustrate this point, we could say that, although generosity may be a real good at which to aim, a single essential defect in the circumstances of an otherwise generous act could be enough to preclude the action from being good. It is therefore commonly more difficult to recognize good specimens of a kind than to detect defective ones, since

¹⁸ For a more extensive treatment of this topic, see the author’s “Moral Knowledge and ‘The Argument from Queerness,’” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (1990): 215–32.

¹⁹ Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, chap. 4, sec. 30, no. 237. It is called the *Dionysian Principle* but can be seen in Aristotle’s remark that “there are many ways of being off-target but only one for being correct” (*Ethics* 2.6.1106b28–30).

the former may undergo considerable scrutiny to pass all tests, whereas a defect may be discovered in the first trial.

Step 3. In our earlier treatment of the intellectual virtues, we discussed comprehension, by which we know the truth regarding the ends of actions, and prudence, by which we know what actions to perform in light of real and true ends. Both comprehension and prudence require for their acquisition and exercise much time and labor as well as possession of the moral virtues. The many sources of possible mistakes demonstrate the necessity of both virtues: intrinsic difficulty of the subject, lack of intelligence, absence of interest or effort, false teaching, focus on pleasure and pain, distorted emotions. As we saw earlier in a cursory fashion, comprehension is acquired and exercised by the process of “induction,” discussed by Aristotle in the last chapter of the *Posterior Analytics*, a sorting through and examination of many individual cases in order to develop a series of rough but increasingly accurate generalizations before final arrival at a universal truth.

We move from admitting the possibility of always-and-everywhere wrongful actions to knowing their existence in the following way. The process of induction in the acquisition and exercise of comprehension is a process of close examination and comparison of various kinds of actions to determine their relation to *eudaimonia*: whether a kind of action is necessary for *eudaimonia* (i.e., an intrinsic part), or consistent with but not required by it, or inconsistent with it. Always-and-everywhere wrongful actions belong to the last category. As this author’s article cited above (note 18) argues, it is surprisingly easy, though only on the simplest level, to show the existence of many such kinds of actions, particularly regarding situations in which the emotions of the investigator are not distorted. When emotional distortions of the investigator are in play, the task becomes much harder, because pleasure and pain then risk becoming the measure and standard of choice. For instance, think of slavery and slave owners. Because the DP is controlling, should a kind of action be recognized as incompatible with *eudaimonia*, all instances of that kind are ruled out *tout court*.²⁰

²⁰ The above is not an argument, but a sketch of how an argument might be made. For an example of such an argument, see the author’s “‘What Else Could I Do?’ The Self-Definition of Consequentialists,” *Logos* 4 (2001): 204–14. A pure consequentialist believes there are no always-and-everywhere-wrongful actions. For a lively debate between a pro- and an anti-consequentialist, see J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

Mistaken Conscience and Guilt?

Guilt and sin are different things. A person may perform an act flawed with respect to *eudaimonia* yet not be blameworthy for having done so. On the flip side, the fact that someone is not blameworthy for his action does not entail that he has not acted in a sinful, harmful manner. We need to be clear about the point where guilt arises from sin.

Question: Can a person be guilty for possessing and acting on a mistaken conscience? If so, what would that account be?

Aristotelian response: Guilt is the “primary harm.” A person is guilty for an action proceeding from a mistaken conscience to the extent the mistake was voluntary and up to him, under his control. On the other hand, if the source of the error lies beyond his control owing either to the difficulty of the subject matter, or to the limited cognitive powers inherent in human nature, or to particular deficiencies in the agent not under his control at the time of action, then the mistake is involuntary. The act may be flawed with respect to the good at which he was aiming, and the subsequent ordinary or primary harms caused by the flawed action will still result. It will lack a share in the intended goods, but the agent himself will not be lacking in the good of *eudaimonia*. “Good action is itself the end.” He participates in and possesses a share of that good because sharing in the human good of rational action is never precluded by the operation of factors beyond the agent’s control. Right action is *always* possible, no matter the circumstances. He may be acting on false beliefs and performing flawed actions but still be acting correctly under the circumstances with respect to *eudaimonia*—he is doing what he should be doing given those mistaken beliefs, the knowledge of their falsity’s being beyond his ability to acquire under the circumstances. What is necessary for flawless action with respect to *eudaimonia*, then, is not true beliefs but beliefs rational and appropriate for the agent to hold and act upon given the knowledge he could appropriately be expected to have possessed. In the earlier “Mistaken Conscience and Sin?” subsection, we saw that an action resulting from the employment of a practical syllogism having a false premise is both a sin and a flawed actualization of the rational agent, but this principle must be qualified when the end is *eudaimonia*.

Because of the ever-present risk of guilt attendant on a mistaken conscience, *to be indifferent to whether one’s conscience is incorrect owing to ignorance under one’s control is a paradigm instance of Aristotelian irrationality.*

Mistaken Conscience and the Duty to Form Conscience Correctly?

Having examined the degree of primary and ordinary harm arising from mistaken action with regard to *eudaimonia*, we can now assess the degree of effort needed to be put into discovering the truth of the premises of the practical syllogisms upon which we act.

Question: Assuming that acting from a mistaken conscience typically involves the loss of or failure to attain important goods, a person would seem to have a duty to acquire a correct conscience, the gravity of which duty is a function of the importance of the (ordinary and primary) goods at stake. Is this inference correct?

Aristotelian response: Failure to fulfill the duty to take all appropriate steps to possess a correct conscience is itself a matter of guilt and a primary harm, and its gravity is a function of the magnitude of the harms (ordinary and primary) in prospect. Furthermore, the more serious the harm, the more difficult to justify the claim of involuntary ignorance, owing to the stricter duty to protect against the possibility of a greater magnitude of harm. Finally, once a person steps away from the path of correct action by performing a flawed action, he enters the path of evil, and therefore the path of indeterminacy and multiplicity (“for evil belongs to what lacks limit, as the Pythagoreans put it, and good to what possesses limit”). Once he does so, many otherwise “surprising and unexpected” consequences not surprisingly occur, such as unpremeditated murders committed in the course of committing a petty crime, and the range of the voluntary and culpable undergoes a dramatic expansion.

Why Producing Clarity Is a Serious Moral Obligation

“PRESUPPOSITION: It is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another’s statement than to condemn it as false. If an orthodox construction cannot be put on a proposition, the one who made it should be asked how he understands it. If he is in error, he should be corrected in all kindness,” St. Ignatius again offers from his *Spiritual Exercises*.

We suppose that the answers given in the Aristotelian responses are approximately correct. We assume that:

1. Moral truth is often of great importance and never of little significance

2. Gaining moral truth is difficult in many circumstances because of the subject's complexity
3. Every agent has a duty to take appropriate steps to assure that he acts on true premises, the seriousness of that duty being a reflection of the magnitude of the goods and harms in prospect both for himself and others
4. Acting on false beliefs always brings about at least the risk of damage to ordinary or primary goods even if the agent is not responsible for his ignorance
5. The causes from which agents are responsible for their ignorance are many and well known
6. Because of the seriousness of the issues at stake, agents have a duty to learn about the causes of self-deception and other forms of voluntary ignorance
7. Every agent has a duty to examine himself honestly and seriously to assure he is not acting from ignorance for which he is responsible, and therefore culpable, the seriousness of that duty being a reflection of the magnitude of the goods and harms in prospect both for himself and others
8. Overcoming voluntary ignorance (and thus escaping from culpable ignorance) is often extremely difficult
9. Acting from culpable ignorance always brings about primary harm to oneself and to one's truly human, best life, *eudaimonia*, the seriousness of that harm being a reflection of the magnitude of the goods and harms in prospect both for himself and others

Now let us imagine the hypothetical case of a person who believes that, if he acts in accordance with what he takes to be his conscience, he is pretty much clear from wrongdoing and guilt, and perhaps from causing other harms as well. He does not take what in fact would be obligatory steps to assure that he acts on correct beliefs, does not examine himself carefully to discover whatever biases he may have in his thinking caused by his distorted emotional loves for bodily and emotional pleasures. Although he might recognize that people are often mistaken in their conscientious decisions and acknowledge that he himself might be subject to the same failings, the possibility that this is true of him in the case at hand is not a live one for him. He has a degree of confidence unsupported by rigorous thought and careful self-examination. If he has any worries at all,

those that might be occasioned by the considerations listed above are not among them.

This is a portrait of a truly awful condition, clearly one of utter vice. It would be terribly foolish and wrong for anyone to infer that, because so-and-so asserts the supremacy of conscience without also providing morally necessary clarifications, the wretched portrait fits him to a *T*. But, though the former does not entail the latter, it does not exclude it either.

We have seen that every virtue is to be found lying in something of a middle ground (often quite difficult to discover) between a vice of too little and a vice of too much regarding an emotion or group of emotions pertaining to a particular kind of action and situation. In the case of the person in this “truly awful condition,” what is the vice to which he is subject and what is the virtue he lacks? The vice is that of *rashness* which may be defined as a settled disposition to possess and display excessive confidence and corresponding deficient fear regarding a particular kind of evil, in this case the evil of acting on the basis of mistaken moral judgments.²¹ The virtue is *courage*, a state (*hexis*) in which one’s feelings of confidence and fear regarding such actions are appropriate. The vice opposed to rashness is *cowardice*, a state in which one is insufficiently confident and correspondingly excessively fearful of acting on mistaken moral beliefs. The common name for this state is *scrupulosity*. Aristotle defines fear as

some pain or disturbance [arising] from the imagination of an evil in prospect of either a destructive or painful nature. Not all evils are feared, such as that one will be unjust or stupid, but only those capable of [causing] great pain and destruction, and these only if they are not far off and appear near and such as they are about to happen. (*Rhetoric* 2.5.1382a21–24)

Aristotle contrasts fear with confidence as “the opposite of fear” and calls what causes confidence “the opposite of what causes fear, so that [confidence is the pleasing emotion caused by] the expectation formed with the imagination of aids being near and the fearful thing being non-existent or far off” (2.5.1382b15–18). One may wonder why Aristotle insists that the harm feared must be either destructive or painful, but we must remember that fear, like all emotions, is always something felt, a “disturbance,” and in fear’s case an unpleasant one at that. We recognize many harms in prospect and take steps to avoid them, such as tooth decay and daily brushing, but

²¹ A bit more will be said in this connection below.

the anticipated harms of tooth decay do not cause us to experience the painful emotion of fear, in contrast to tomorrow's appointment with the dentist's chair.

Aristotle makes an important observation regarding the vice of rashness: "Of the excessive [state there are two sorts], the one by [the excessive] lack of fear [is] unnamed—many [states] are unnamed—the other by being confident excessively [is] rash" (*Ethics* 2.7.1107b1–3).²² So, let us consider these two forms, the deficiently fearful and the excessively confident. They may seem to be equivalent but they are not. The one is deficiently fearful because he recognizes no or little evil in the thing he foresees. The other may recognize the presence of a possible evil but is excessively confident in his own ability (along with sufficient available assistance) to overcome it. The first seems to be a victim of the Alfred E. Neuman syndrome: "What, me worry?" The second may be subject to the vice of pride (excessive estimation of one's abilities, achievements, and personal worth caused by distorted emotions of various kinds). The person for whom the portrait fits is in a terrible state of vice, whether that of rashness or of the unnamed condition.

If the Aristotelian approach to conscience is correct, then the risk of two serious, never-to-be-underestimated and difficult-to-avoid harms is ever present: (1) the harm caused by acting from a mistaken conscience and (2) the possible guilt resulting from acting on ignorance for which the agent is responsible.

If the person in the hypothetical case described above does indeed suffer from the vice of rashness or deficient fear, what may be said to him? Before we attempt to answer this question, we need to note an important observation Aristotle makes about people in a state of vice. In distinguishing between a person in a condition of vice who acts in accordance with his reflective desire (i.e., according to his conscience) and the weak-willed person who acts against reflective desire knowing all along that he is acting wrongly, Aristotle first supposes that the vicious individual seems easier to cure because he is acting according to his reflective desire, and to induce him to change his behavior one need only show him the fact of his error, whereas the weak-willed person's behavior cannot be changed by showing him his cognitive error because he has none: "When water chokes, what is needed to wash it down?" (7.2.1146a31–35). Considerably later in the

²² Notice how Aristotle, to preserve his pattern of deficiency–middle–excess, resorts to "excessive lack of fear" rather than to "deficient fear." Either way, neither fear nor confidence is found here lying in a middle.

same book of the *Ethics*, Aristotle corrects his earlier supposition. “The intemperate person (i.e., a type of vicious individual), however it was said, is not changeable because he abides by his [initial] reflective desire” (7.8.1150b29–30). Why is this? Though it may seem that the vicious person’s actions are controlled by his thinking, this is not actually the case. In fact, both his actions and his thoughts are controlled by the same source, his distorted emotions:

There is someone [the weak-willed person] whom, because of an emotion capable of moving [*pathos ekstatis*; ecstatic] away from correct reason, that emotion so controls as not to act according to correct reason, but does not so control as to be the sort [of person] to be persuaded that it is required [*dein*] [for him] to pursue such [bodily] pleasures without restraint. This is the weak-willed person, being better than the intemperate one, nor is he bad simply, for the best thing in him, the [true] starting-point, is preserved. (7.8.1151a20–26)

In the weak-willed person the “best thing is preserved”: a correct judgment of the end, the true good. His distorted emotions have taken control of his actions but not of his thoughts. In the case of any vicious person, his distorted emotions have led to distortion not only in his actions but also in his thoughts. He is “heavily defended.” No longer does his reason remain the “best thing” in him, for it is reduced to the task of serving his distorted emotional desires. Therefore, to argue with a vicious person is typically an exercise of shouting into the wind. He will not listen to reason even as he believes himself fully rational. What of possible benefit can be said to him? Many options exist, and the best approach will no doubt depend on the circumstances of the individual, but we can see clearly that the ultimate problem is not one of mistaken thoughts, but of distorted emotions, called “attachments” in the classical literature of asceticism. We begin there.

Book I of St. John of the Cross’s *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is the *locus classicus* of the tradition.²³ There he treats of attachments as disordered (emotional) loves, agreeing with Aristotle. He mentions and briefly examines five harms arising from these disordered loves: they weary, torment, darken, defile, and weaken their wounded possessors. Though weariness and torment are unpleasant, they are not strictly harms, but blessings,

²³ Especially chaps. 6–13 in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1990), 130–51.

because they provide incentives for their possessors to escape these conditions. Weakness, as we see in the case of the weak-willed person, is recognized for what it is. Defilement, often unrecognized, is a great evil, a primary harm. Darkness of the intellect, ignorance of the true good, is at least an ordinary harm causing a great many additional ordinary and primary harms and, if voluntary, a primary harm possibly leading to the wastage of one's life.

The duty to form one's conscience correctly is the most fundamental, inclusive, and serious duty we face in our lives. Many, even when they learn about the nature and existence of distorting emotional loves and attachments, may resist the necessary work of rigorous self-examination to discover and root out their disordered emotional loves which defile, weaken, and blind them. They avoid undertaking this work because it is painful and the cost is great to their distorted emotions which the achievement of detachment requires. In these persons' fierce resistance to rigorous self-examination, they court sheer, utter disaster. The serious moral obligation to take reasonable steps to warn a person off from such a catastrophe is manifest, a consequence of the disastrous harm in prospect. The first step in forming a conscience is to inform the hearer what it is.



The ultimate source of all the difficulties and confusions described in this article is the absence of an adequate definition of conscience. Even if there is no common understanding, a clear statement of what the writer or speaker himself means is essential. Without even a stipulated definition's being made clear, many statements are made without the hearers' having any basis for judging their truth (see, again, Plato, *Gorgias* 447c–8e). And possessing no definition from which to begin, one need not investigate conscience's components and structure, its workings, its complexity, its function. With consideration of conscience's components, workings, and function (good) bypassed, attention can easily be directed away from the following questions: Is sin, flawed action, possible? What is the good with respect to which a sinful act is flawed? How important is that good? Are there difficulties encountered in recognizing sin where it exists? What are they? Is it possible these might be overcome? How difficult are they to overcome? Does one have a duty to act to acquire a correct conscience? What must one do to fulfill this duty? How difficult is it to fulfill this duty? Can one be guilty for not having fulfilled this duty? How serious is that guilt?

This separation of conscience from good, flaw, harm, and guilt can suggest that acting in accordance with one's conscience in some way distances the agent from causing harm and absolves him from guilt. In contrast, a person reflecting on the nature of conscience from an Aristotelian perspective will come to see the controlling significance of three considerations. First, nothing is more important in human life than striving to form a correct conscience because of what is potentially at stake: (1) the primary harm of failure as a rational animal owing to voluntary ignorance and (2) primary and ordinary harms following from a mistaken conscience of the greatest seriousness to oneself and others. Second, correct thought is not infrequently a rare and praiseworthy achievement, overcoming as it does obstacles posed by: (1) the inherent complexity of the subject matter, (2) cognitive limitations within human nature itself, (3) particular limitations of the individual, and (4) disordered and potentially blinding emotions caused by the distortive power of emotional and bodily pleasures and pains. Third (and a corollary of the second), most rational animals are to some degree seriously deficient in their thought and action regarding *eudaimonia*. The possession of moral and intellectual virtues is natural to the rational animal, since that possession is the perfection of his nature, but everything we know about the human condition shows that the consciences of ordinary human beings are for the most part pitiable at best.