

**When Aristotelian Virtuous Agents Acquire the Fine for Themselves,
What are They Acquiring?**

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When Aristotelian Virtuous Agents Acquire the Fine for Themselves, What are They Acquiring?

Abstract: In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one of Aristotle's most frequent characterizations of the virtuous agent is that she acts for the sake of the fine (*to kalon*). In IX.8, this pursuit of the fine receives a more specific description; virtuous agents *maximally* assign the fine *to themselves*. In this paper, I answer the question of how we are to understand the fine as individually and maximally acquirable. I analyze *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.7, where Aristotle highlights virtuous activity (*energeia*) as central to the fine, and argue that when virtuous agents pursue the fine, what they are pursuing is virtuous activity. I then address various problems, like how virtuous people can maximize virtuous activity yet sacrifice their lives, which would seem to amount to sacrificing future opportunities to virtuous activity and therefore not maximizing it. I also eliminate alternative interpretations that do not take virtuous activity as necessary to the fine, for example the common good interpretation, whereby virtuous agents pursuing the fine amounts to their pursuing the common good.

Keywords: Aristotle; fine; kalon; noble; activity

Introduction

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE],¹ one of Aristotle's most frequent characterizations of the virtuous agent is that she acts for the sake of the fine (*dia to kalon, tou kalou heneka*); when a virtuous person does a brave action, she does it for the sake of the fine, and likewise for the various other virtuous actions described in Books III–IV. But there is no elaboration of this pursuit of the fine until near the end of the discussion of friendship, Book IX, Chapter 8. Here, Aristotle introduces the idea that the virtuous person, specifically the praiseworthy self-lover, *acquires* the fine *for herself*. Up to this point, there has been no clear indication as to who the recipient of the fine is when one

¹ For Aristotle and Plato, I utilize the OCT and my own translations.

acts for the sake of the fine, if there is a recipient at all. Further, Aristotle introduces the idea that this pursuit is maximal: virtuous people try to *maximize* the fine for themselves.

How can one understand the fine in a way that makes sense of its being an object that is individually and maximally acquirable? No paper fully answers this question, although the answer is of utmost importance; without it we cannot fully understand Aristotle's virtuous agent. I will develop an interpretation of the fine that makes sense of this language, arguing that when virtuous agents maximally acquire the fine for themselves, the thing that they are maximally acquiring is virtuous activity (*energeia*), which for Aristotle is at least the most important aspect of the ultimate end of human pursuits, happiness (*eudaimonia*).

Section 1 begins with an exposition of *NE IX.8*, where Aristotle depicts the virtuous person as maximally acquiring the fine for herself. Section 2 then turns to the preceding chapter, where Aristotle's sliding between 'the fine' and 'activity' suggests that agents who act for the sake of the fine are acting for the sake of virtuous activity. Therefore, we are to understand the praiseworthy self-lover's *maximally acquiring the fine for herself* as her *maximizing her own virtuous activity*.

I then confront two challenges to this interpretation. Section 3 addresses problems that arise from the maximal nature of acquiring the fine. Aristotle says that virtuous agents will sometimes sacrifice their lives; but it is unclear how virtuous agents' maximizing the fine/virtuous activity is compatible with their sacrificing life and so foregoing all future opportunities to virtuous activity. I argue that such sacrifices are in fact superlative forms of virtuous activity. Another problem that arises from maximizing the fine/virtuous activity is that it would seemingly lead to vicious

competitiveness. I argue that maximizing virtuous activity involves both maximizing just distribution of activity and taking turns.

Section 4 then addresses a second challenge: alternative interpretations of the fine. Their main problem is that they do not take virtuous activity as necessary to the fine, despite the insistence of *NE IX.7* to the contrary; even interpretations that take the fine to *include* virtuous activity suggest that the fine includes things other than virtuous activity, such that virtuous activity is not necessary for all instantiations of the fine.²

Before proceeding, I will specify my scope. First, my claims are not about every instance of ‘the fine’ but only about the fine that praiseworthy self-lovers maximize, and, what I take as the same, the fine that virtuous agents act for the sake of. Second, my focus is on the fine’s extension, on the question of *what thing* praiseworthy self-lovers are maximizing when they maximize the fine. Space prevents me from addressing the fine’s intension, what *makes* something fine or what ‘the fine’ *means*.

1: Aristotle on Self-Love

Let us consider *NE IX.8*’s discussion of the self-lover (*philautos*), where it emerges that pursuit of the fine is individual and maximal. Aristotle begins by assessing the common opinion that the self-lover is deplorable. He qualifies this claim by setting apart the *praiseworthy* self-lover, who pursues the fine in order to gratify the understanding, the true locus of human selfhood (1168b29–1169a3). Here is Aristotle’s description:

² One other interpretation takes virtuous activity as necessary to the fine: Pakaluk, ‘Obviousness of the *Kalon*’ (see also *Nicomachean Ethics*, 193). Pakaluk develops his interpretation by way of Plato and many passages across Aristotle’s ethical discussions, while I focus on *NE IX.7–8*, which I believe contain Aristotle’s core doctrine of the fine as necessarily involving virtuous activity.

(A) It is true concerning the excellent (*tou spoudaiou*) that he does many things both for the sake of friends and for the sake of fatherland, and will die on their behalf if necessary; (B) for he will give up money, and honours, and contested goods in general, saving up the fine for himself (*peripoioumenos heautōi to kalon*); (C) for he would choose to be intensely pleased for a short time rather than slightly pleased for a long time, and to live finely for [just] a year (*biōsai kalōs eniauton*) rather than many years of whatever quality, and one great fine action (*mian prāxin kalēn kai megalēn*) rather than many small [actions]. (D) And this perhaps holds in the case of those dying on behalf of others; these indeed choose a great fine thing for themselves (*hairountai dē mega kalon heautois*). (E) And they would give up money in the case in which their friends will gain more [as a result]; (F) for money arises for the friend, but for himself, the fine (*autōi de to kalon*); (G) thus he portions out the greater good for himself (*to dē meizon agathon heautōi aponein*). (H) And [so also] the same mode of operation in the case of honours and ruling opportunities; (I) for he will give up all these things to the friend; for this is for him fine (*kalon gar autōi*) and praiseworthy. (J) Reasonably then, he seems to be excellent, since he chooses the fine in place of everything (*dokei spoudaios einai, anti pantōn hairoumenos to kalon*). (K) But it is also possible to give up actions to the friend, and to become a cause for the friend [to act] is finer than to act oneself (*einai kallion tou auton prāxai to aition tōi philōi genesthai*). (L) In all praiseworthy things then the excellent person appears to assign more of the fine to himself (*ho spoudaios phainetai heautōi tou kalou pleon nemōn*). (M) In this way therefore one should (*dei*) be a self-lover, just as has been said; but as the many [depict self-lovers], one should not be [a self-lover of such a sort]. (1169a18–b2)

Aristotle endorses the behaviour of these “*spoudaioi*” who act for the sake of the fine (J, L), saying outright that we *should* be self-lovers of the praiseworthy sort (M); the above is normative.³ But what exactly is Aristotle prescribing? Apparently, Aristotle’s endorsing the praiseworthy self-lover amounts to endorsing the principle that each

³ I will focus on justified ends and will remain agnostic on issues of motivation; a conclusion about agents’ motivations would require a conclusion about the fine’s intension, which goes beyond the paper’s focus on extension.

“portions out to himself the finest and best goods” (*aponemei... heautōi ta kallista kai malist’ agatha*) (*NE IX.8.1168b29–30*; see also *1159a12*). Two aspects of this principle are worth emphasizing. First, the virtuous *acquire* the fine *for themselves*. This is clear from the pairing of distributive language and pronouns referring back to the virtuous person, in (B), (G), and (L). Second, this acquisition is *maximal*. For praiseworthy self-lovers assign what is *finest* to themselves, giving either (1) a lesser kind of good (e.g. utility) to friends and thereby getting the fine for themselves (B, D–I), or (2) a lesser degree of the fine to friends (the fine that is acquired in executing the virtuous action) and thereby getting a greater degree of the fine for themselves (the fine that is acquired in sacrificing the opportunity to execute the virtuous action) (I–K).

2: The Fine and Virtuous Activity

So the virtuous person maximally acquires the fine for herself. Three questions arise. First, what is the fine? Second, how is it acquirable? Third, is the maximal nature of this acquisition problematic? I will address the third question in the next section, and the first two questions in this section. I will argue that the fine is virtuous activity (to answer question one), so we are to understand the virtuous person’s acquisition of the fine as her engaging in virtuous activity (to answer question two).

My argument focuses on *NE IX.7*. The chapter is often neglected in favour of *NE IX.8* in understanding the fine, but this preceding chapter crucially informs the latter.⁴ Aristotle opens by explaining why benefactors love beneficiaries more than vice versa:

⁴ Only Rogers uses *NE IX.7*’s comments about activity to illuminate *NE IX.8* on the fine, arguing that what is fine for *NE IX.7*’s producer is the producer’s own activity (“Aristotle’s Conception,” 366). For a crucial difference between our interpretations, see

(A) Benefactors love and cherish their beneficiaries even if these are neither useful nor will become [useful] at a later time. Which also applies in the case of craftsmen; for every craftsman cherishes his own product more than he would be cherished by [the product], under the hypothesis that the product become ensouled. And this holds most of all perhaps concerning poets; for these exceedingly cherish their own poems, just as being fond of [their own] children. (B) And the case of benefactors indeed resembles such a case; for the beneficiary is the product of these [i.e. the benefactors]; thus they [i.e. the benefactors] cherish this one [i.e. the beneficiary] more than the product [cherishes] the producer. (C) The cause of this is that being is to everyone choiceworthy and lovable, and that [it is] in activity that we are being (for [it is] in living and acting [that we are being]). (D) The product is somehow the producer, in activity; thus he [i.e. the producer] is fond of his product, because [he is] also [fond of his] being. (E) And this is natural; for what he [i.e. the producer] is in potentiality, this the product points to in activity. (C) *toutou d' aition hoti to einai pāsin hairēton kai philēton, esmen d' energeiāi (tōi zēn gar kai prattein)*. (D) *energeiāi de ho poiēsas to ergon esti pōs; stergei dē to ergon, dioti kai to einai*. (E) *touto de phusikon; ho gar esti dunamei, touto energeiāi to ergon mēnuei*. (1167b31–1168a9)

(A) says that benefactors love their beneficiaries even if no utility accrues to themselves. Aristotle says that the same applies to craftsmen, but it is unclear how. As he proceeds, there is no mention of utility, only of products or works (*erga*): craftsmen love their *products*, poets do this “most of all,” as if the *products* were their own children. For the same point to carry on from the benefactor example, there must be something choiceworthy or valuable (*hairētos*) about the craftsman’s product independent of utility.

Section 4. Further, Rogers makes praise central to the fine (358, 361), but praise seems central not to the fine but to what it should elicit. The fine is of ultimate value, but Aristotle denies such status to things like honour on the grounds that they rely more on things external to the agent (*NE I.5*); this focus on what relies on the agent suggests that activity and not praise is crucial to something ultimately valuable like the fine.

What is choiceworthy is the producer's/benefactor's own being. Aristotle argues that the producer values his product because (1) being is choiceworthy (C), (2) one accesses being ("we are being") in activity (C), and (3) a product counts as activity (D, E).⁵ (D) is clear that the value especially concerns the being being *one's own*. The product just is the *producer*, in respect to activity, which actualizes the *producer's* being, which the *producer* values; what makes the product choiceworthy to the producer is the former's connection to the latter's being. Or consider (E), which says that the product is in activity what the *producer* is in potentiality; producers have the potentiality of producing, but it is only in actively producing a product where producers substantially actualize their own being. Again, the focal point is the *producer's* being; what makes the recipient of the action choiceworthy to the agent is the former's activation of the latter's being.

It is important to note that the main point here concerns one sort of actualization: the virtuous activity that *NE* I.7's famous 'Function Argument' associates with the rational nature of humanity. *NE* IX.7 expands on *NE* IX.4's discussion of the features of friendship (*ta philika*); after IX.5 has expanded IX.4 on wishing goods and IX.6 has expanded IX.4 on concord, IX.7 expands on the active form of wishing goods, namely, *doing* goods or benefaction. Since Aristotle most probably gives a normative account of

⁵ The product/beneficiary is thus a twofold *ergon*; she is both an *ergon* in the sense of a resulting product of the activity as well as an *ergon* in the sense of the activity of the producer/benefactor (*Physics* III.3) that is the latter's end (*Metaphysics* IX.1050a21–3). Actions and productions are contraries (*NE* VI.4), where the former but not the latter are ends in and of themselves (*NE* VI.2.1139a35–b4); yet both the benefactor and producer alike actualize their own rational natures in their action and production, respectively, with *phronēsis* involved in the former, craft skill (*technē*) in the latter.

friendship in IX.4-7, the benefaction between friends in IX.7 most probably counts as *virtuous* activity.

Immediately after this argument that benefactors love beneficiaries more than vice versa because of the virtuous activity accruing to the benefactor, Aristotle suggests that, correlatively, there is more pleasure for the benefactor than for the beneficiary. This series of elaborations makes sense only if Aristotle uses ‘the fine’ and ‘activity’ interchangeably:

(A) And at the same time the thing [i.e. the product] according to [the benefactor’s] action is fine (*kalon to kata tēn prāxin*) for the benefactor, so that this one [i.e. the benefactor] rejoices (*chairein*) in him [i.e. the product]; (B) but for the one having been acted upon there is nothing fine (*ouden kalon*) in the one doing, but if anything, [only] the advantageous; and this is less pleasant and lovable [than the fine]. (C) And the activity of the present is pleasant (*hēdeia d’ esti tou men parontos hē energeia*), and (*de*) hope of the future, and (*de*) memory of the past; but (*de*) most pleasant is the thing according to the activity (*to kata tēn energeian*), and likewise [most] lovable. (D) The product therefore (*oun*) remains for the one having produced it, since the fine is long-lasting (*to kalon gar poluchronion*); but for the person having been acted upon, the useful passes away. (E) And memory of fine things (*te... tōn men... kalōn*) is pleasant, but of useful things, not at all or less; (F) but [with] expectation the reverse seems to hold (*hē prosdokia d’ anapalin echein eoiken*). (1168a9–19)

(A) explains that the benefactor’s action is *fine* for him, with pleasure resulting from this; (B) says that the action is not fine for the beneficiary, only advantageous, which is less pleasant than the fine. (C) expands upon this comparison in pleasure by appeal to temporal factors, but note that (C) speaks of ‘activity’ and not of ‘the fine’; (C) states that while virtuous *activity* is pleasant across the past, present, and future, the most

pleasant thing is present activity.⁶ In sum, the fine or activity is more pleasant than the advantageous, where it is open at this point in the passage for this to refer to past, present, or future.

The remaining passage then picks up on (C), comparing the pleasure of the fine and of the useful in respect to each timeframe, but dispenses with (C)'s diction of 'activity' and reverts to (A) and (B)'s diction of 'the fine,' comparing the fine with the useful, or in (B)'s words, 'the advantageous.' (D) concludes that the product has a lasting effect since *the fine* is long-lasting. What justifies this slide between 'the product' and 'the fine,' and what justifies the idea that the fine is long-lasting? In other words, what does the 'therefore' opening (D) refer to? It refers to the previous passage, 1167b31–1168a9, which we have seen claims that the *product* constitutes the *activity* of its producer. This previous passage's point about *activity* justifies (D)'s sliding to the endurance of the *product* from the endurance of the *fine*—as long as 'the fine' is interchangeable with 'activity,' the term used by (C), whose point (D) continues. What of (D)'s idea that the *fine* is long-lasting? This derives from the previous passage's idea that *activity* involves the actualization of one's own being or existence, which is long-lasting (at least as long-lasting as the agent is); again, this derivation works only if (D)'s 'the fine' is interchangeable with the previous passage's 'activity,' and this seems to be the case since, again, (C) uses 'activity' for its point and (D) continues this point using 'the fine.'

⁶ I take line 13's *men* with the two immediately following *de*'s; Aristotle is contrasting present activity with anticipation and memory of it, claiming in the rest of (C) that it is present activity or 'the thing according to the activity' that is *most* pleasant. If we instead take line 13's *men* with the third *de* in (C), Aristotle would be introducing 'the thing as the activity' as something that *contrasts* with present activity, and it is unclear what this would be.

Besides implying interchangeability between ‘the fine’ and ‘activity,’ (D) makes one further contribution. Namely, it suggests that the useful, in comparison to the fine, is not long-lasting; this presumably regards pleasure, since the surrounding (C) and (E) discuss pleasure. The compressed thought is perhaps this. Regarding the present, activity is more pleasant because in that instant activity involves something more valuable and more long-lasting, namely actualization of one’s being, as well as awareness of this actualization (if the following argument in *NE* IX.9 about full activity requiring cognition of that activity is to be trusted). The useful has no comparable impact, passing away as soon as it is used.

(E) then turns to the past. Like (D), (E)’s appeal to an earlier claim implies interchangeability between ‘the fine’ and ‘activity’; (E) claims that memory of the *fine* is pleasant, which seems to repeat (C)’s claim that memory of past *activity* is pleasant. Again like (D), (E)’s advance rests in comparing the fine or activity to the useful, which is contrasted as involving little to no pleasure in remembering it. Unfortunately, (E) is also like (D) in being compressed; perhaps the thought is that the useful is always for the sake of something else (*NE* 1155b19–21), such that there is pleasure in remembering not what was useful but the further goal that the useful brought about.

What is most relevant for my purposes is that the switching between ‘the fine’ and ‘activity’ at 1168a9–19 implies a necessary association between the fine and virtuous activity (F, which completes the passage by discussing the future, has no bearing on this and will therefore be passed over). Virtually all commentators agree that Aristotle takes virtuous activity to imply the fine, and (C)’s point about virtuous activity *continues* (A) and (B)’s point about the fine, suggesting that a point about virtuous activity suffices for a point about the fine. Aristotle also works the other way, suggesting that the fine implies virtuous activity. As noted, (D)’s point about the fine

presupposes a point from the earlier part of *NE IX.7* that mentions only ‘activity,’ and (D) and (E)’s points about the fine *continue* (C)’s point about virtuous activity, suggesting that a point about the fine suffices for a point about virtuous activity.

Turning from the passage’s flow to its substance, we can again see that the fine implies virtuous activity. (A) says that the thing that is fine is that which accords with the action; more specifically, what is fine for the *agent* is the thing considered under the aspect of the *action*. (B) gives the converse; there is nothing fine for the *passive* recipient. This contrast continues in (D); the fine is associated with *doing*, whereas the merely useful is associated with *passivity*. In conclusion, all relevant instantiations of the fine necessarily imply virtuous activity.

Note that this is a stronger claim than that the fine necessarily implies virtuous *action* (*praxis*). Without appreciating this distinction between virtuous action and virtuous activity, one might lose sight of the necessary connection between virtuous activity and the fine; from here, some interpreters (to be assessed in Section 4) correlate the fine with features of virtuous *action* that are *external* to the agent, instead of with virtuous *activity* and its features that are *internal* to the agent.

This distinction appears in 1168a9–19 above; (A) mentions that which is considered as the ‘action,’ and (C) that which is considered as the ‘activity.’ Aristotle makes it clear that ‘action’ and ‘activity’ are not interchangeable. When (A) discusses ‘action,’ the point is to contrast this with the passivity of the beneficiary. Now Aristotle could have used ‘activity,’ as he does in (C), but its omission is explained by the *men* (A)... *de* (B) construction, which might be translated pedantically as ‘on the one hand (A)... but on the other hand (B).’ (A) considers the agent’s assessment of the action (it is fine for him) and (B) contrasts this with the *beneficiary’s* assessment of the action (it is advantageous for him); as indicated by the *men... de* construction, the object of

assessment is fixed while the assessors are contrasted. Now if the object is fixed, then it must be action and its external features (i.e. beneficial results) that Aristotle has in mind here, not activity and its internal features (i.e. the actualization of the agent's being). For the action is clearly relevant to both the agent and the affected recipient, but the activity/fine is not relevant for the passive recipient (the latter is not actualized and hence loves less). On this understanding, (A) suggests that the (external) action is recognized by the agent as fine, as activity involving (internal) actualization.⁷

What is involved with the actualization internal to the agent that distinguishes virtuous activity from virtuous action? Consider Aristotle's comparison between crafts and (moral) virtues:

(A) What holds in the case of the crafts and what holds in the case of the virtues are not alike; for things that arise from the crafts bear their goodness (*to eu*) in themselves. (B) Therefore it is enough for these things to arise [merely] bearing certain qualities. (C) But things that arise according to the virtues (*kata tas aretas*) are done 'justly' or 'temperately,' not [merely] if they bear certain qualities (*pōs echēi*), (D) but also if the *agent* does [them] while bearing certain qualities (*ho prattōn pōs echōn prattēi*): first if he does them knowingly (*eidōs*), secondly [if he does them] deciding [on them], and deciding [on them] for the sake of themselves (*proairoumenos di' auta*), and third if he does [them] from a steady and unchanging disposition (*bebaiōs kai ametakinētōs echōn*). (*NE* II.4.1105a26–33)

(A) suggests that with a craft, the goodness of its issue can be determined simply by reference to the issue itself; per (B), one can simply ask whether the issue bears certain qualities. In what follows, we find that this refers to qualities *external* to the agent. For (C) suggests that things that arise from *virtue* cannot be judged simply by reference to their bearing certain qualities and (D) specifies that further appeal must be made to *the*

⁷ My use of 'internal' and 'external' roughly follows Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 369–70.

agent's bearing certain qualities, where these qualities are *internal*: knowing what she is doing, deciding on what she is doing for the sake of itself, and doing this from a steady disposition.

Let us apply these thoughts to the distinction between virtuous action and virtuous activity. First, note that virtuous action can be done by anyone in any number of ways (*NE* 1144a13–20); the non-virtuous can simply mimic the *outward motions* of the virtuous. But something further is required for *paradigm* instances of virtuous *action*, that is, instances involving the fine or virtuous *activity*, where the being of the agent is actualized; here one must turn to what is *internal*.⁸ Virtuous action but not the fine or virtuous activity might obtain if the agent is unaware of what she is doing, or decides on the action not for the sake of itself but for some other end like profit,⁹ or

⁸ In Rabbås' terminology ("Virtue, Respect, and Morality," 622–5), an agent can fulfill various external "action conditions" without being virtuous, without fulfilling various internal "agent conditions." That the distinction between virtuous activity and virtuous action rests wholly on what is internal to the agent explains why "the fine shines through" although misfortunes prevent the complete success of a virtuous action (1100b28–31). For the idea that rational activity rather than physical execution is key, see note 11.

⁹ It goes beyond the paper to fully relate doing an action for its own sake and doing it for the sake of the fine, but the two seem coextensive, per Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 370–2. Doing a courageous action for the sake of *the fine* involves the virtuous activity of the agent, whereas doing the same courageous action for the sake of other ends does not (*NE* 1115b20–4). And doing an action for the sake of *itself* also seems to point to the virtuous activity; *NE X* suggests that virtuous action is choiceworthy for the sake of *itself*, where this is elaborated upon in terms of activity (1176b6–11), and also suggests that virtuous action is choiceworthy for the sake of something else (e.g. benefiting others), where this is elaborated upon as separate from the activity of the agent (1177b12–20). I leave to another paper the question of whether or not 'for the sake of the fine' and 'for the sake of itself' implicate the agent's motivation (note 3); they at least implicate a justification principle.

stumbles upon the action instead of doing it from a stable character. For the fine or virtuous activity to obtain, one's rational nature must not be thus disengaged.

Let us see how our findings about *NE IX.7* illuminate what follows in *NE IX.8*. *NE IX.7* argues that what the agent finds valuable in benefaction is her own virtuous activity, and that the fine that is the characteristic object of pursuit for the virtuous agent necessarily involves this virtuous activity. Now, *NE IX.8* depicts praiseworthy self-lovers as trying to assign (*nemein*) or portion out (*aponemein*) the fine to themselves. How is it that the fine is acquirable? Per *NE IX.7*, benefactors achieve the fine, where this is described in terms of their being actualized in their activity. Unless *NE IX.7*'s doctrine of the fine is to be abandoned in the following chapter, we should understand *NE IX.8*'s self-loving acquisition of the fine in similar terms; the self-sacrificing agent acquiring the *fine* for herself amounts to *actualizing* herself in the self-sacrificial action.

3: The Problem of Maximization

This interpretation of the fine makes sense of how the fine can be acquired for oneself. But like any interpretation of the fine, it must also make sense of how the fine is *maximally* acquired for oneself. On my reading, virtuous agents maximally acquiring the fine amounts to their maximally engaging in virtuous activity. But *NE IX.8* depicts such maximization as sometimes involving sacrifice of one's life; how is the maximization of virtuous activity compatible with sacrificing future opportunity to virtuous activity?

Aristotle answers that self-sacrifice is a maximal form of virtuous activity. This is the point behind his claim (C, 1169a18–b2 above) that the virtuous prefer a single large fine action to many small ones or a short fine life to a long mediocre one. It seems that some kinds of virtuous action involve an amount of virtuous activity/the fine (i.e. actualization of the agent) that outweighs the amount brought in by a lifetime of

virtuous actions. Now one might wonder how the agent knows that her remaining lifetime will not provide an opportunity that brings more of the fine than the self-sacrifice being deliberated; Aristotle seems to assume that sacrificing one's life is an action that is superior in kind because the value of one's life is unique. For example, *NE* 1161a15–17 says that being is the greatest benefit (hence, children are specially indebted to fathers) and *NE* 1117b9–13 says that being is especially valuable when it is imbued with virtue (hence, the courageous person is especially pained at the prospect of death).

Another obstacle arises due to the maximal nature of the acquisition of the fine. Any interpretation of the fine has to make sense of this maximal claim in a way that precludes the vicious conflict of people trying to maximize *limited* goods. Some have argued that the fine is an *unlimited* good (Politis, "Primacy of Self-Love," 162) or one that is not amenable to interpersonal competition (Annas, "Self-Love," 8; Broadie, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 424; Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 297; Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship*, 69–70; Whiting, "Self-Love," 174–6). The latter solution is unavailable to me, for a competition between virtuous agents in *virtuous activity* is conceivable. The former solution, understood in terms of opportunities for *virtuous activity* being unlimited, might be true. Yet this leaves cases where a *particular* opportunity happens to be limited and requires conflict resolution as to who will execute it; consider sacrificing one's life, or deeds that concern *NE* IV.2–3's magnificent and magnanimous people, those that are "not easily surpassed" (1123a17–18) or "difficult and impressive" (1124b20–21).

Remember that what is being maximized is *virtuous activity*. This includes *just* action, which would fairly distribute opportunities for activity. So while *NE* 1136b22

says that the decent person “overreaches” (*pleonektei*) for the fine,¹⁰ the problems of injustice associated with overreaching for other objects will not arise. Still, does not sharing opportunities for virtuous activity undercut the maximization principle? No, for *NE* IX.8.1169a18–b2 (K, above) claims that sacrificing the opportunity to do virtuous action is finer than doing the virtuous action itself.¹¹ One might think that this would lead to a regress of inaction, with both fine-maximizers vying for the finer thing of sacrificing the opportunity to virtuous action. If this silliness does not already discourage the fine-maximizers, then the following system would prove enticing: taking turns doing the action and giving it up. In maximizing the fine for themselves, *NE* IX.8’s self-lovers are not embodying the situation deplored just two chapters earlier: everyone wanting the same thing in the same respect (1167a30–4 discusses all citizens wanting the same offices). Rather, there is concord within this maximization schema of who takes which roles at which times (1167a34–b2). This will involve agents in a communal endeavour taking turns doing the virtuous action and giving it up; this is simply Aristotle’s political model of ruling by turns (*Politics* 1259b4–6, 1287a16–18, 1332b23–7).¹² There are three results of this system, all of which would satisfy fine-

¹⁰ Aristotle thus re-appropriates ‘overreaching’ with its negative connotations (as he does with ‘self-love’). Salmieri, “Selfishness,” makes a similar observation; however, we differ in that Salmieri tries to show that *philautos* is better translated ‘selfish’ than ‘self-lover.’

¹¹ Aristotle elaborates elsewhere why it is finer to sacrifice the virtuous action than to do it—on my reading, why there is *more virtuous activity*, or worded in line with *NE* I.7’s defining human virtue in terms of rationality, why there is more *rational activity*. *Politics* 1325b21–3 says that there is more rational activity involved in setting up actions for others than just doing it oneself; for example, the master-builder who sets up a system of delegation to make a complex whole run.

¹² Price, *Love and Friendship*, 269, and Kraut, *Human Good*, 21, also appeal to the system of taking turns to block the regress of inaction.

maximizers: no opportunity of virtuous action is lost, the finer action of sacrificing the opportunity is constantly cycled, and contributing to this system of virtuous exchange involves yet more virtuous activity.

Section 3 has delineated two ways in which *NE IX.8*'s maximization scheme might pose a problem for my interpretation of the fine. The first has to do with self-sacrifice. Since I understand maximizing the fine for oneself as maximizing one's own virtuous activity, it might seem strange that the praiseworthy self-lover who maximizes her own virtuous activity should sacrifice her own life—that is, the opportunity for future virtuous activity. I argued that this self-sacrifice in fact promotes one's own virtuous activity by being itself a superlative form of virtuous activity. The second problem I discussed was that of vicious competition; it might seem like maximizing virtuous activity, like maximizing any limited good, would lead to vicious competition. I blocked this result by appealing to Aristotle's political system of taking turns and to the fact that virtuous activity includes just actions.

4: Alternative Interpretations

Let us conclude with some alternative interpretations of the fine. Maximizing the fine results in maximizing the common good in *NE IX.8* (1169a8–11), which has led some to adopt the common good interpretation [CGI] (Irwin, "Aristotle's Conception of Morality," "Sense and reference," "Beauty and morality"): what it is that virtuous agents are acting for the sake of when they act for the sake of the fine is simply the common good. This sets the stage for the rather Platonic idea that one should maximize the community's happiness and not one's own (*Republic IV.420c1–d5*): while the common good might happen to include one's own happiness and sometimes not conflict with its maximization, acting for the sake of the fine qua common good involves acting for the sake of this set's elements exclusive of one's own happiness (and therefore

exclusive of what is at least its most important part, one's own virtuous activity). Others have emphasized the aesthetic connotations of *kalon*, which might also be translated as 'beautiful,' and have pointed to various passages where Aristotle associates the fine with aesthetic properties; commonly cited is *Metaphysics* 1078a31–b1, which identifies the forms (*eidē*) of the fine as the definite (*to hōrismenon*), order (*taxis*), and proportion (*summetria*). From this emerges an aesthetic interpretation (Cooper, "Reason, Moral Virtue, and Moral Value"; Kraut, "An aesthetic reading"; Richardson Lear, "Moral Virtue"); in acting for the sake of the fine, virtuous agents act for the sake of these aesthetic properties (which are, again, independent of virtuous activity). In Section 4, I will mainly counter CGI. There are two reasons for this. First, I am sympathetic to some elements of the aesthetic interpretation; I believe that the aesthetic properties just mentioned *supervene* on proper functioning (Richardson Lear, "Moral Virtue," 117–22; Rogers, "Aristotle's Conception," 355, 357–8). But, and this is the second reason for focusing on CGI rather than on the aesthetic interpretation, fully extrapolating on the aesthetic elements of the fine would require answering the question of what *makes* something fine; this would go beyond the scope of my inquiry, from the fine's extension to its intension.

Let us then turn to three problems with CGI. First, CGI cannot account for the language of acquisition. We can see this by turning to the fact that CGI would make the scarcity of 'the fine' in Aristotle's account of justice even more difficult to understand than it already is. We might think that justice is the most clearly other-regarding of the virtues and therefore that the fine qua common good should feature prominently in its account. However, 'the fine' only appears twice in the entirety of *NE V*, where one of these is a colloquial use (1135b25) and where the other is particularly puzzling for the common good reading: 1136b20–2 says that the decent person seems to take less than

his share, but that he in fact overreaches (*pleonektei*) for some other good, like the fine without qualification (*tou haplōs kalou*). Getting the fine is depicted as getting a greater individual share of the good for *oneself*, which would be odd if ‘the fine’ refers to the *common* good. Further, Aristotle speaks of *overreaching* for the fine, which would have to be understood as overwrought irony, if ‘the fine’ refers to the common good. And then there is *NE IX.8*. Aristotle depicts virtuous agents as maximizing the fine for themselves, which would amount to their maximizing the common good for themselves. But how is it that one can acquire the *common* good for *just oneself*? Stranger still is *NE IX.8*’s emphasis of maximizing the fine *for oneself*; it is unclear why Aristotle should so emphasize *self*-directed acquisition of something that is *shared*.

Another problem with CGI is that it allows for predications of the fine to be made independently of the internal features of the agent. But as explored in Section 2, Aristotle suggests that the fine or virtuous activity obtains only if certain internal features of the agent obtain, not merely if certain external features of the virtuous *action* (e.g. its promotion of the common good) happen to obtain. Perhaps the most crucial of these internal features is the end of the virtuous action; Aristotle claims that virtuous people do virtuous actions for the sake of the fine and that non-virtuous people can do the same virtuous actions but *not* for the sake of the fine, as when a person does a just action but not justly or not as the just person would (*NE 1144a13–20*). Importantly, virtuous actions not done for the sake of the fine do not count as fine; *NE 1115b22* says that we can infer from a brave action’s being fine that its end is fine, implying that an action must be for the sake of the fine for itself to be fine.¹³ Aristotle likely holds this

¹³ Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 212. This seems to contradict *Eudemian Ethics VIII.3*, which allows both for actions done for the sake of the fine and actions *not* done for the sake of the fine to be fine (1249a13–6). However, *NE 1136b22* does mention the fine *haplōs*

view because the possibility of an action's being fine without being for the sake of the fine leaves open a case of fineness that he is likely to reject: the depraved tyrant does a 'fine' action, say, the magnificent one of constructing a city that promotes the common good, while doing this not for the sake of the fine but for the sake of her depraved ends. The fine then is distinguished by internal features of the agent; 'the fine' is a gloss of virtuous activity and the relevant actualization of the agent's being occurs only if she is executing her rational function in the proper way, which includes, among other things listed in our *NE* II.4 passage, having the appropriate end.¹⁴ A virtuous *action* done by an agent, even if it is the same externally as done by the virtuous person, is not fine (on my reading, does not instantiate virtuous activity) if it is not for the sake of the fine. But CGI must reject this; a virtuous action *is* fine (on CGI, *does* promote the common good) regardless of internal features of the agent like her doing an action for the sake of the fine.¹⁵

(‘without qualification’); so the *Eudemian Ethics* might be discussing actions not done for the sake of the fine which are fine but not fine *haplōs*. With virtuous actions not done for the sake of the fine, Aristotle does not hint at their being labeled ‘virtuous’ in only a qualified way; their external sameness to virtuous actions that *are* done for the sake of the fine merits the unqualified labels of ‘just,’ ‘brave,’ etc.

¹⁴ Consider cleverness (*deinotēs*), where reason is effectively employed but only in a qualified way if directed towards wrong ends (*NE* 1144a23–b1).

¹⁵ One might wonder about the introduction of ‘instantiates’ and ‘promotes’; is the fine coextensive with the common good or what promotes it? The shift here has to do with the fact that we are discussing ‘fine’ as an adjective instead of ‘the fine’ as a substantive. When utilizing ‘fine’ as an adjective, the introduction of verbs of involvement is implicit in Aristotle and clearly required to make sense; otherwise, ‘doing fine actions’ would amount to ‘doing the common good actions,’ ‘doing aesthetic properties actions,’ or ‘doing virtuous activity actions.’ Instead, we have ‘doing actions *that promote* the common good,’ ‘doing actions *that instantiate* aesthetic properties,’ or ‘doing actions *that involve* virtuous activity.’

A related problem also applies to several interpretations that are very similar to mine. Some argue that the fine includes, *among other things*, virtuous activity, which suggests that the fine is a necessary condition of virtuous activity but that virtuous activity is not a necessary condition of the fine (Crisp, "Nobility," 240; Owens, "The Kalon," 272–3; Rogers, "Aristotle's Conception," 366). Recall Section 2's argument that virtuous activity *is* necessary to the fine. The difference might not seem that important, until we realize that the aforementioned interpretations imply that virtuous actions can be fine without being for the sake of virtuous activity; they can be fine by being for the sake of some other element in the set of the fine that does not involve virtuous activity, which leaves open the problematic tyrant scenario. It is worth noting that the aesthetic interpretation seems to have this problem as well. The fine qua various aesthetic properties that virtuous agents act for the sake of and that praiseworthy self-lovers maximize is conceptually independent from, and can be instantiated in the absence of, virtuous activity; so a virtuous action can be fine, that is, it can instantiate various aesthetic properties, without being for the sake of virtuous activity.

Here is a third problem with CGI: it compromises the status of virtuous activity as an all-dictating, ultimate end. Aristotle suggests that virtuous agents pursue the fine, presumably as something ultimate. But Aristotle also implies that they pursue virtuous activity as ultimate; *NE I* makes clear that they pursue their own virtuous activity as ultimate, as virtuous activity is the most important if not only part of the ultimate end of happiness. On my reading, we do not have two ultimate ends, but only one with two different labels. CGI, however, has the virtuous agent balance two distinct ultimate ends against each other, one's own virtuous activity and the fine qua common good. CGI's balancing act is posited in response to and therefore assumes a conflict between the fine

and virtuous activity; but does Aristotle believe in the existence of such conflict, or the balancing act for which it is presupposed?

Some interpreters answer affirmatively; according to them, there can be a conflict between the common good (the fine) and an individual's happiness (virtuous activity), and Aristotle prioritizes the community's happiness over the individual's. For example, Kraut understands Aristotle as rejecting (1), "that if you are capable of leading a philosophical life, then you should in all circumstances do so, and that you should reject all requests that you serve the community instead." Kraut rather has Aristotle opt for (2), "that if one is free (as many people are) to pursue" the philosophical life that *NE* X clearly poses as superior to the political life, "then one should do so" (*Human Good*, 104). Kraut offers a negative prescription regarding communal involvement, not to ignore it (1), but does not offer a positive prescription, taking communal involvement rather as a regulative constraint (2). This constraint, in turn, is set against maximizing one's own happiness. Kraut claims that while *NE* IX.8 is indeed depicting competition, it is of a sort constrained by justice (83–5), and so one that is not dictated by principles of maximization (98–101, 119–120). Similarly, Irwin denies that conforming with "a demand of justice" is "directly related to [one's own] happiness" ("Good of Political Activity," 84), and Price claims that doing an "obligatory" action does not directly enhance one's own happiness (*Virtue and Reason*, 72–3).¹⁶ So the common good can conflict with one's own happiness, of which the principal component is virtuous activity; and CGI understands the fine in a way that conveniently fits this picture, with

¹⁶ It is unclear why acting in accordance with justice does not count as a token of virtuous activity that one is maximizing; see (even) Price, "Friendship," 201, Salmieri, "Selfishness," 113–15, and Wielenberg, "Egoism and Eudaimonia-Maximization," 286–294.

the ultimate end of the fine qua common good being a check against the ultimate end of virtuous activity.

But I would argue that promotion of the common good is rather a *source of* virtuous activity, which undercuts the need to depict Aristotle as balancing two distinct ultimate ends against each other. Consider the following line from *NE* 1094b10: it is “finer and more divine [to achieve the good] for a people and cities” (*kallion de kai theioteron ethnei kai polesin*) than for an individual.¹⁷ Despite the appearances, this does not show that the common good takes priority over oneself. Recalling my claims about the fine (Section 2 and note 11), we can understand the greater fineness here in terms of greater virtuous activity; there is more rational activity involved in greater projects (achieving the good for a community) than smaller ones (achieving the good

¹⁷ This line problematizes CGI; it is unclear how ‘finer’ and ‘more divine’ can combine, for the fine is social and moral but the divine is not (*NE* X.8.1178b8–23; see also *Politics* 1325b16–30 and *Metaphysics* 1078a31–b6, which imply that the fine is not necessarily social). Here is a solution based on my reading: Aristotelian divinity is characterized by the rational, and there is more rational activity involved in achieving the good for many than for few.

just for oneself).¹⁸ This casts promotion of the common good, even apparent ‘sacrifices,’ as a *source* of virtuous activity rather than a *constraint on* it.¹⁹

Understanding Aristotle in this way, as taking communal involvement as a source of activity rather than a constraint on activity, is important lest we conflate his position with Plato’s precisely on a point of Plato’s that Aristotle rejects. In *Republic* IV.420c1–d5, Socrates claims that his theory maximizes the good of the city and *not* of any one group or individual. This principle is reinvoked at VII.519e1–520a2, in connection with forcing the philosopher away from the superior rational activity of contemplation to the inferior rational activity of politics. Of this policy Socrates says

¹⁸ This suggests a solution to a problem posed by *NE* 1178b1–3’s connecting fine actions to external goods (related passages in Irwin, “Virtue, Praise, and Success,” 63; Richardson Lear, “Moral Virtue,” 122–3): “for actions there is need of many [external goods], and to the extent that the actions are greater and finer (*kallious*), the need is greater.” This seems to imply that the fine tracks the *visible* scale of the project (promotion of the common good or aesthetic properties), and so the finer the project, the more external goods are required. I would suggest, however, that visible scale is not fundamental; greater visibility supervenes on the project’s greater complexity, which involves greater amounts of *rational activity*. For the relationship between ‘rational’ and ‘virtuous,’ see note 11.

¹⁹ Such ‘sacrifices’ might include letting the community determine what kind of happiness individuals choose. To us individuals, *NE* seems to offer two alternatives: *NE* I–IX seem to suggest that happiness involves primarily *moral* activity, *NE* X rather that it involves primarily *theoretical* activity. From the perspective of achieving the individual good, there is then a difficult question of when to engage in each kind of activity. From the perspective of achieving the *communal* good, this problem does not arise. The question of what kind of activity *I* should engage in comes second to the question of what kind of activity *the community* would have me engage in. Instead of having cases of Henry Moseley or a glut of theorists, the Aristotelian polis will take up *Politics* VII.9’s and *NE* 1094a28–b2’s policy of dividing up practical and theoretical labour according to natural capacity. Note that even theorists here are politically engaged, by selecting their activity in accordance with the needs of the community.

that each of the philosophers “spends the greater part of his time in philosophy, but when his turn comes, each toils in political affairs and rules for the sake of the city, doing this not as something *fine* but as something *necessary*” (VII.540b1–5, my emphasis). Now, taking one’s turn is just and therefore presumably fine (even if the political activity involved in taking one’s turn is not fine), and the overarching project of the *Republic* is to show that justice is at least the most important part of one’s own happiness; in this way, Plato does not go as far as Kraut, Irwin, and Price in divorcing actions in accord with justice, like capping one’s own rational activity, from one’s own happiness. Still, he prescribes not maximizing one’s own rational activity and therefore one’s own happiness, insofar as practical rational activity is inferior to contemplative rational activity. CGI takes Aristotle to suggest this too, to endorse the *Republic*’s idea that it is the good of the city and *not* the good of the individual that is maximized; virtuous agents prioritize the fine qua common good even if this means capping one’s own virtuous activity (whether political or contemplative).

But such interpretations cannot explain a number of Aristotle’s positions, one concerning activity in a purely political context, and the other concerning activity between political and contemplative contexts. As for the former, if these interpretations are right, we should expect Aristotle to depict sacrificing one’s power to other members of the community (per his political model of ruling by turns) as a constraint on one’s own virtuous activity or as not maximizing the fine *for oneself*. However, recalling Section 3’s discussion of the idea that it is finer to sacrifice the opportunity to virtuous action than to execute it, we find that Aristotle in fact implies that sacrificing power involves not a cap on the fine or virtuous activity but a greater amount of the fine or virtuous activity; one’s sacrificing the opportunity to do virtuous action is not only

virtuous activity in and of itself, but is also virtuous activity qua contribution to the running of a greater whole.

And if CGI is right, we should expect Aristotle to depict any engagement in political activity at all by a philosopher as capping one's own rational activity, but he does not. Instead he depicts such engagement as *preserving* one's own rational activity. Even the contemplation-lauding *NE X* does not lose sight of the fact that humans have different parts of the soul, and with these different parts of the soul, the different virtues of thought delineated in *NE VI*: the theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) that is relevant to contemplative rational activity and the practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) that is relevant to practical rational activity. With this in mind, we can see how Aristotle avoids *both* Plato's conclusion that engaging in political activity involves a cap on rational activity and therefore one's own happiness, *and* that maximization of rational activity in the form of superior contemplative activity involves ignorance of practical affairs. Concerning the latter, Aristotle obviously believes that one should not negate one's own rational activity, but this is precisely what one does by completely ignoring political affairs for the purpose of pure contemplation; one acts against the mutually-entailing pair of *phronēsis* and the bundle of individual virtues of character (*NE VI.13*). So the philosopher will not ignore practical affairs that demand her attention; by engaging in political activity, the philosopher then is preserving her rational activity (particularly regarding *phronēsis*).

Whereas Plato would depict such preservation as involving a cap on one's own rational activity (per the aforementioned quotes from the *Republic*), Aristotle explicitly rejects Plato here: he understands Plato's policy of maximizing the happiness of the community and not maximizing the happiness of the individual, as *denying* happiness to the philosopher (*Politics* 1264b15–25; see also 1265a28–38). Aristotle clearly thinks

that this result is unattractive, and so he does not accept the combination that he thinks leads to it. Instead of claiming that the common good and *not* the individual's good is maximized, *NE IX.8* claims that the common good is maximized *by* the individual maximizing her own good: "if everyone competes regarding the fine and strains to do the finest things, then with respect to the common everything that should be would be, and in respect to the individual the greatest of goods would obtain for each, if indeed virtue is such as this" (1169a8–11). Contra Irwin, Kraut, Plato, and Price, then, communal concerns are not regulative constraints on but rather positive sources of virtuous activity; in terms of the fine, it is not that the fine qua common good is a constraint on virtuous activity, but rather that promotion of the common good is a source of the fine qua virtuous activity.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that when virtuous people maximally acquire the fine for themselves, what they are maximizing is virtuous activity. Section 1 began with an exposition of the text delineating this maximization, *NE IX.8*, before Section 2 established that the preceding *NE IX.7* takes virtuous activity as necessary to the fine. This led to the result that in maximizing the fine for themselves, virtuous agents are maximizing their own virtuous activity. I then addressed some objections. The first was that the self-sacrifice of the virtuous agent would seem incompatible with her trying to maximize virtuous activity (Section 3); this incompatibility was dissolved by appeal to the fact that sacrificing one's life involves a superlative amount of virtuous activity. The second obstacle was that maximizing virtuous activity would seem to lead to the same problem as other overreaching behaviour (Section 3); this problem, vicious competition, was pre-empted by appeal to the facts that virtuous activity includes just action and that sacrificing the opportunity to virtuous action is finer than taking up the opportunity,

which enables a system of taking turns. Finally, Section 4 addressed some alternative interpretations, especially the common good interpretation whereby the virtuous agent's pursuit of the fine amounts to pursuit of the common good. I highlighted three problems with this interpretation. First, it cannot make sense of the language of individual acquisition in *NE* IX.8. Second, it takes predications of fineness to be independent of agents' ends when Aristotle in fact takes such predications as necessarily involving agents' ends. Finally, it posits an ultimate end, the fine qua common good, that is independent of individual virtuous activity, and prioritizes the former over the latter in a Platonic spirit; but this both commits Aristotle to a balancing act between two ultimate ends that he does not even hint at, and conflates Aristotle's position with Plato's precisely on a point that he rejects.

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