

Aristotelian Contributions to the Concept of a Conscience

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Abstract

The question this thesis seeks to address is that of whether there is a basis to be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for developing an understanding of what we now call moral conscience, and, if established, how this compares with a much later, post-Cartesian ethics which explicitly and more organically includes a concept of moral conscience. Our usage of the term today seems to imply that moral conscience is about feeling as well about thinking. Yet accounts of it such as that found in Kant focus on the rational.

I look first at how the term conscience appeared in philosophical writings in Ancient Greece and how the concept evolved and acquired its moral application as it passed through Stoic, and early and medieval Christian thinkers.

I then focus on one example of a modern, developed conception of conscience - that of Kant - and endeavour to examine this concept with a view to evaluating whether it can account for the ways in which we invoke the concept of a conscience today. The internal reasoning of the self-legislated moral individual Kant speaks of constitutes an 'inner court' in which one judges the moral value of one's actions. I try to show how for Kant, conscience, this inner court, is a built-in element of his practical reasoning, whereas for Aristotle there is the awareness resulting from the apparentness of one's end and the means best corresponding to it, this awareness being an imagination and sensitivity which develops out of the interdependency of *phronesis* and moral virtue.

I turn then to Aristotle to explore, in an analysis of relevant passages in *Nicomachean Ethics* Books 1 to 6, what his practical reasoning, or *phronesis*, is and how it is central to all moments of a moral action. This is with a view to understanding how thought and knowledge relates to action in Aristotle and how feeling is a part of this picture. This reading of Aristotle's *Ethics* is of course not exhaustive and focuses, for the purposes of the thesis, on the presence of *phronesis* in action as developed in this work by Aristotle. But it allows me, in the following section, to argue that Aristotle's ethics is highly useful to us in hammering out our concept of a conscience. I argue that it is useful on several counts, notably for its important involvement of feeling and of *phantasia*. This, in the footsteps of Nussbaum, Frede, Noel and Fink, I do by concentrating on the dense few lines in Book 6 of *Nicomachean Ethics* (where Aristotle focuses on *phronesis*), 1140b 17-20, arguing that Aristotle gives here the 'apparent' (*phainetai*) a place within *phronesis*. This, I submit, points to an involvement of the imagination within practical reasoning, or *phronesis*. My argument concludes with a proposal to see this involvement as a basis for conceptualising moral conscience, taking the latter to include a motivating awareness of and feeling for the moral value of actions past, present or future.

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List of abbreviations

NE: Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle.

GMM: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, I. Kant

CPR: Critique of Pure Reason, I. Kant

CPrR: Critique of Practical Reason, I. Kant

Introduction

The term conscience is one that has long been widely used in common language. Conscience is often represented as a quiet voice inside reminding one of the morally better or wiser course of action in situations where one is seriously considering an easier or otherwise more attractive route. By the same token the word is used to refer to the uncomfortable thoughts one might have about a past action which contravened or did not match up to what one knew or now thinks, knows or suspects to be good and right. As well as these applications to present and past situations it is an equally active kind of thought with regard to future possibilities in which one recognizes a certain moral obligation, for example to work towards something or to commit to a given enterprise or relationship. “Conscientious objector” is a familiar term used to invoke the idea that one’s individual understanding or impression of particular actions as being morally bad is sacred ground not to be violated under any circumstances, a value judgement upon past, present or future actions which shows these actions in a particular light, that of their moral worth and one’s moral involvement in them. Conscience is an accusing or quieting voice which, in the words of Paul Strohm, may try to “goad, prick, wheedle, denounce and harass” or to “mollify and assuage”¹.

But conscience is not only conceived in terms of thoughts, whether highly reasoned through or intuitive. Conscience as we speak of it today refers also to an accompanying feeling that something is right or, more often, not. People will describe themselves and view others as being uncomfortable with a certain action proposed, requested, or recalled. Conscience can even be a feeling which acquires the intensity of torturing guilt or excruciating anguish which pursues one years after the action it concerns, as well as there being milder expressions of conscience when one finds peace in knowing one did the right thing in circumstances where this required significant struggle, sacrifice or soul-searching. The freedom from conscience’s threat and pursuit can be something we enjoy, especially when we know we came close to actions which would have incurred its relentless prosecution. The very fear of conscience’s accusing finger can lead one, in some cases, to prolonged examination of, or hesitation with regard to, a given action.

Conscience seems to be both a thought and a feeling, but this pairing up comes in highly varying proportions and concentrations. Some people surprise their peers by being able to sleep at night with knowledge of having committed actions most consider to be of serious detriment to another person, society at large or to the agents themselves. Conscience seems to have little impact on them, while others will remain deeply troubled by trivial events they were involved in or serious ones in which they bore little or no responsibility. Can we throw light on our current conceptualization of the complex and elusive phenomenon denoted by ‘conscience’ by considering the genesis and development of this conceptualization?

¹ *Conscience, A very short introduction*, introduction. P. Strohm (2011), Oxford University Press.

I The term “conscience” from the Ancient Greeks to the Middle Ages

I.1 Greek *suneidesis* and Stoic *conscientia* – “knowing with oneself” and the emergence of moral conscience

The term conscience, and certainly the idea or ideas it refers to, can be traced back all the way to Ancient Greek literature. Though debate surrounds its origins, the Greek term for conscience, *suneidesis*, and relevant ideas about it, can be found in Democritus and Plato and up through Stoic thought with writers such as Chrysippus, Cicero, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Paul of Tarsus introduced the Greek term into the foundations of Christian theology, and Jerome, Augustine, Bonaventure, and Aquinas, to name but a few major Christian authors, all contributed towards developing the concept, using the Latin, Stoic term *conscientia*. Jerome was the first as far as we know to explicitly link *conscientia* to the Greek *suneidesis* when he chose it as the translation of the latter in Paul of Tarsus’ writings. Both the Arab and Hebrew languages did not have a word for conscience until the modern period². The modern English use of “conscience” thus appears to have roots in the Greek and Latin concepts surrounding this term.

The retracing of *conscientia* back to its Hellenistic³ origins is eased by the fact that it is a literal translation of the Greek term. *Suneidesis* and *conscientia* can be literally translated as ‘knowledge that one shares with oneself: *sun-*, to share, and *eidēnai*, knowledge, together with the reflexive pronoun. The Ancient Greek idea was that one could see oneself as split in two, one part sharing knowledge with another, standardly about a fault, though occasionally about a meritorious action. As R. Sorabji mentions in the introduction to his recent work on conscience⁴, this idea returns to centre-stage in, among others, Kant’s thoughts on conscience where the “inner court” is a key metaphor. We will return to this later. Sorabji also argues that the less surprising concept of sharing knowledge with another person, rather than with oneself, only appeared much later than Democritus and Plato, with the Stoics, such as Cicero, who used the term in this way when speaking of the disclosure to another person of faults one has committed⁵. However we can easily see the relevance of this split-person etymology of *suneidesis* in everyday language today with such remarks as “I could kick myself for having done this”, “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I did that”, or “I convinced myself it was right”. Treating oneself as partly other – i.e. assessing one part of oneself with another - remains a central aspect of our experience of what we call conscience. Before Plato and Aristotle, the Greek playwrights of the 5th and 4th centuries BC – such as Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes – were using this metaphor in the same way as we often use it today, the agent playing two roles at the same time; the part of one which is aware of a fault but prefers to keep it secret, and the part which is uncomfortable with this corpse in the cupboard and seeks to unveil or highlight the fault and accuse the other part. Sorabji notes usages of the term in the works of playwrights Sophocles (497-405 BC)⁶, Euripides (480-406 BC)⁷ and Aristophanes (who died in 386 BC)⁸. These examples concern a variety of faults committed by the characters concerned: infidelity in marriage, the obstruction of justice in legal trials, irony about not being able to succeed in politics if one has a conscience, murder, and divorce. In general, as Sorabji points out, throughout Ancient Greek literature

² The modern Hebrew word for “conscience” is *matzpun*, a 19th century loan translation from its Arabic contemporary *dameer*, meaning “something hidden”, or “the heart”.

³ As we will look at further on, C. A. Pierce’s work, *Conscience in the New Testament*, expounds convincingly upon the Greek rather than Hebrew origins of the term which was from Paul of Tarsus onwards for more than a millennium adopted mostly by Christian authors. R. Sorabji, in his recent work *Moral Conscience through the Ages*, which we will also refer to as we go on, endorses Pierce’s conclusions.

⁴ *Moral conscience through the ages*, introduction. R. Sorabji (2014), Oxford University Press.

⁵ Sorabji notes that Cicero uses the Latin tradition of *conscientia* to designate the sharing of one’s faults with witnesses such as gods, humans or even the walls of a room. See Cicero’s *Pro Caelo*, 60.

⁶ *Fragment 669* (Dindorf), Sophocles, taken from Stobaeus.

⁷ *Media*, 495; *Orestes* 395-96. Euripides.

⁸ *Wasps* 999-1002; *Thesmophoriazousae* 477; *Knights* 184. Aristophanes

there is no sign of an individual sense of conscience as we know it today; conscience was entirely public, one having a sense of shame when realising what others would think of a given action.

C. Pierce, author of a dated but largely unchallenged study of *Conscience in the New Testament*, writes at length about the origins of *suneidesis* in Greek and Roman texts and concludes it was mostly a question of sharing knowledge with oneself *of a fault*. Sorabji notes two important exceptions to this. Plato's and Aristotle's usage of the term shows that its application prior to the Stoics and Christians was a more ambiguous form of knowledge-shared-with-oneself⁹. Pierce's study, to which Sorabji pays considerable respect, identifies in detail two categories of *suneidesis* phrases used by more than fifteen major Ancient Greek and Roman writers, a few of whom we have already mentioned, from Pythagoras and Democritus through to the historian Herodian in the third century A.D. The first is a non-moral use of the term which refers to *consciousness* rather than to moral conscience. The second is the one that does refer to a moral conscience. Pierce submits that the second developed out of the first. The first category Pierce gives is usages of the term *autōi suneidenai*, and the references are almost all to Plato and Aristotle's works. Aristotle appears nowhere in the second category. *Autōi suneidenai* is used in the examples offered to designate an awareness or consciousness of something within oneself. Plato, notes Sorabji, uses the full term *autōi suneidenai* nine times in his writings, and all of them refer to a defect or weakness, but not all to a strictly moral one. What Sorabji doesn't mention is that Plato doesn't often make distinctions in narrowly moral terms but as often as not in wider terms of excellence and beauty. In Alcibiades's encomium of Socrates, the author speaks of being aware that certain emotions would arise within him should he listen to Socrates¹⁰. This again is not a directly moral situation. Pierce summarises the first category in the following terms: "PTI [philosophical-Technical-(ethically) Indifferent] usage then of *autōi suneidenai* is that which is best rendered in English as *I am conscious of... in myself* or *I feel that I...* It is confined to two authors and both of them are professional philosophers."¹¹

The second category of usages has an ethical character and there are considerably more of these in Ancient Greek, Roman and Christian literature, as documented by Pierce. The ethical character of this usage amounts to a moral content for the consciousness the first category examples are about. This means that they saw moral conscience as an intellectual awareness or value judgement. One striking early example of this moral consciousness is in Xenophon's *Cyropedia*: "*We know with ourselves* [sunismen hēmin autois] *that we began as children and still continue in the practice of noble and good works*".¹² This is a way of saying that his being aware, or conscious of his actions encompasses an awareness of their ethical value. The other examples of *autōi suneidenai* in ethical usages are, says Pierce, invariably to do with morally reprehensible actions: "*Thus he who knows with himself that he has neglected oaths sworn before the gods, can never again be counted happy; and these are the two marks of every example of the MB* ['moral-bad' instance of *autōi suneidenai*] *use – the bad act, the bad disposition from which it springs or the bad condition or character resulting from it; and the unhappy consequences of knowing such an act, disposition or character with oneself*"¹³.

⁹ Pierce's work includes an extensive table of references to *suneidesis* and related concepts in Ancient Greek and Roman literature in pre-Christian centuries. He lists some six instances in Plato's works where *autōi suneidenai* is mentioned, most of which concern examples of reprehensible behaviour, yet one of which refers to "being wise" (Plato's *Apology*, 21 b). Democritus, Xenophanes and Aristotle also appear several times with usages in the same vein as Plato's. *Conscience in the New Testament*, p. 132-147.

¹⁰ *The Symposium*, Plato, B. Jowett (tran.), www.gutenberg.org 215a-216b: "*And now, my boys, I shall praise Socrates... (...) I am conscious that if I did not shut my ears against him, and fly as from the voice of the siren, my fate would be like that of others,—he would transfix me, and I should grow old sitting at his feet. For he makes me confess that I ought not to live as I do, neglecting the wants of my own soul, and busying myself with the concerns of the Athenians; therefore, I hold my ears and tear myself away from him. And he is the only person who ever made me ashamed, which you might think not to be in my nature, and there is no one else who does the same.*"

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 22

¹² *Cyropedia*, I.v.II. Xenophon.

¹³ *Op.Cit.* p.24.

To know with oneself with regard to moral situations one was or is involved in, seems to have been something used or mentioned mostly in situations of, for want of a better phrase, unfavourable moral significance. In fact, Pierce cites playwrights as far back as Aristophanes who have the most morally charged and, even by our common understanding, conscience-loaded usage of *autôî suneidenai*: “A fragment¹⁴ of [Menander, 291 BC] declares that he who knows anything at all with himself, no matter how brave he is, will be reduced to the extreme of terror by this knowledge”¹⁵.

Knowing with oneself includes the important but torturing moral task of bearing the knowledge of one’s faults. There are also usages of *autôî suneidenai* which speak of the joy and peace one experiences when *not* conscious of having done bad things, or, in other words, having a free conscience.

“Cyrus¹⁶ is exhorted to the pursuit of virtue, for this will lead to joy in prayer and a sure and certain hope of favourable response to it, in that he may reckon that he has no knowledge with himself of ever having neglected this pursuit”¹⁷.

Pierce concludes from his analysis that the normal usage of *autôî suneidenai* in Ancient Greek literature was moral-negative, unless otherwise qualified as moral-good or non-moral.

As we have seen, Plato and Aristotle fall almost exclusively into the non-moral category when it comes to usage of *autôî suneidenai*. Although, as mentioned, moral and non-moral are questionable categories to apply to Plato, Aristotle certainly did work with a distinction between action with regard to a desired end and action with a view to the produced, between action as such (concerned with an end-good and therefore ethical) and productivity or art, or action with a view to changing things. So while we could perhaps see Plato’s usages of *autôî suneidenai* as pre-moral and as referring more to *consciousness* than to moral conscience, we will have more to consider in Aristotle, who does single out the ethical domain, at least in the sense of what concerns character rather than cognitive formation, for extensive enquiry in its own right, particularly of course in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Of the handful of references to conscience in Aristotle given by Sorabji only two are to his *Ethics*, and these two are not direct usages of *autôî suneidenai* or *suneidesis* or other usages for *knowing with oneself*, but merely imply something similar¹⁸. In the section on Aristotle later in this thesis we will look closely at whether there is in his *Nicomachean Ethics* a moral conscience-*avant-la-lettre*. Given the clearly established presence of the concept of both non-moral consciousness and moral conscience in his predecessors, it would be at least worth noting if the first major philosopher to write an extensive treatise on ethics could dispense with addressing this *knowing with oneself*. But two things will help us to get a better picture of how close Aristotle got to moral conscience as we now tend to understand it.

The first will be to trace the development of this term, however selectively, through the Stoics and up to the term *synderesis* used by theologians of the middle ages, Thomas Aquinas in particular.

Secondly, we will look at how Kant saw conscience. Kant, as mentioned, exploits the split-person idea we find in Plato’s embryonic ideas on conscience. By looking closely at Kant’s concept, we will hope to get a better grasp of what conscience came to be on this model, and be in a position to see whether conceptions in the Aristotelian tradition contain anything of value that has gone missing along the lines running from Plato to Kant and beyond.

¹⁴ Fragment 632 (Kock), Menander, in *Extracts*, Stobaeus.

¹⁵ Op.Cit, p.25.

¹⁶ *Cyropedia*, I.vi.4. Xenophon

¹⁷ Op.Cit., p.25

¹⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.4, Aristotle: intellectual fault. 9.4: concerning those who commit suicide because they are hated for their terrible deeds.

Sorabji tells us that Cicero and Seneca “ascribe to Epicurus a view of conscience as *fear* of detection and punishment”¹⁹. The ascribing an element of fear to conscience was in the 1st centuries BC and AD not a new interpretation of Ancient Greek understanding of *autōi suneidenai*. Euripides in the 5th Century BC, Sorabji reminds us, certainly saw conscience in terms of fear of the consequences of bad actions, and we have mentioned above how Menander described moral conscience of bad actions as terror. However, what *is* new with both Seneca and Cicero is that, as Sorabji notes, they offer another understanding of Epicurus’ conscience; the idea of conscience as akin to being watched. Seneca encouraged people to live as if someone else were watching them, then pointed out that nothing escapes the eye of God who is therefore also watching and finally concludes that one must watch oneself. This is clearly an idea close to the one we have seen in Ancient Greek literature of *knowing with oneself*, or sharing knowledge with one’s self. The idea that one part of us is looking at the other. According to Cicero, Epicurus also saw conscience as having a second manifestation, that of imagining an example so to avoid making mistakes and direct one’s life in the right direction. It would seem that this is the first time imagination was brought into the concept of conscience. The role of imagination in the evaluation of which action to take will reappear later, when we consider Aristotle’s *phronesis* and argue that there is an important ingredient of our conception of conscience contained in the role he assigns to *phantasia* within *phronesis*. As Sorabji says: “Epicurus’ imagined philosophical watcher, endorsed also by the Stoics, foreshadows the conscience as imagined impartial spectator in Adam Smith.”^{20,21} Smith, as we shall see, was an important predecessor of Kant on the theme of conscience.

I.2. Aquinas: Suneidesis and synderesis

Jerome was the first known writer to use the term *suneidesis*, translated as *conscientia*, in his third century commentary on the *Book of Ezekiel*, where he picks up on Origen’s interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the four animals described in a prophetic vision. The first three are ascribed by Origen to the faculties of the human being (body, soul and spirit) and the fourth, an eagle, to the mind watching over itself. Jerome adopted this interpretation and said that this fourth creature represented the conscience. Latin translations of Origen (who wrote in Greek) apply the word *conscientia* to his description of the human mind, or spirit, watching over itself and being aware of sin when committed. Jerome certainly made the link between the watchful inner eye of Origen’s eagle interpretation and *conscientia*, though there is some debate as to whether the Greek references and manuscripts of Origen available to him employed the term *suneidesis* or *synderesis*. Be that as it may, the early twenty-first century French theologian Jacques de Blic²² (1887-1948) found that of the 26 mentions Jerome makes of *conscientia*, in 24 of them he makes it clear he is referring to *suneidesis*. *Synteresis*, or *synderesis* as it came to be known in Latin texts from the 12th Century onwards, was used by Jerome as a word for man’s capacity of conscience. This, explains Sorabji, seems to be because Origen, in the translations of him available to Jerome, use the word *spiritus* (notably in his interpretation of Ezekiel’s fourth beast) interchangeably with *conscientia*. Jerome, presumably looking for a word to describe this newfound idea of a capacity of conscience, adopted the Greek word *sunteresis*. *Sunteresis* is generally used to describe the watching over of, preserving, looking out for, safeguarding of something. This apparent though undeveloped distinction of Jerome between *conscientia* and the “spark of conscience”, was worked with for several centuries, especially by Aquinas, as we shall see a little later on in this section. By the time Bonaventure was writing there was in any case a clear distinction between *conscientia* and *synderesis*, the latter referring to a natural inclination or direction of the will, lying at the root of conscience. Interestingly for our later consideration of Kant, Bonaventure saw *conscientia* as an inner *indicatorium*, court of justice. It is a function of the intelligence which judges of the ethical value of an

¹⁹ Op.Cit. p. 23.

²⁰ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pt. 3, Ch. 1.

²¹ Op.cit., p. 24.

²² Jacques de Blic, *Conscience ou synderese?*, in *Revue d’ascetique et de mystique* 25, 1949, 146-57.

action. *Synderesis* has a motivational function, being an inclination towards the good, and belongs to the will.

*“It is the natural weight (pondus) of the will (voluntas), a weight possessed by feeling (affectus)... It directs feeling concerning what should be wanted (in appetendis)”*²³.

Synderesis is for Bonaventure an inclination of the will, a feeling drawing one towards or away from an action. This reminds us of our opening remarks about conscience, as we know it in common usage today, having these two dimensions of thought and feeling. As Bonaventure puts it:

*“non... ex parte cognitivae, immo potius... ex parte affectivae [animae]”*²⁴.

Sorabji notes that this is the earliest reference he could find to conscience as a feeling. It is ascribed by Bonaventure to *synderesis* and not to *conscience*, to which he gives a purely cognitive role in conscience, but as Sorabji points out, there is a strong historical argument in the to and fro between Greek and Latin translations for saying that *synderesis* only came to be treated as a function in itself by accident, and could otherwise be absorbed into a *conscientia* (*suneidesis*) with a two-fold (intellectual and emotional) dimension²⁵.

With Bonaventure another discussion takes form, one which both Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas took up in turn. It is the question of whether conscience and *synderesis* are habitual or natural, i.e. whether we develop them, or whether they are in any way present in us innately. Bonaventure, again in his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, says that *synderesis* is partly an acquired disposition and partly innate and involving moral first principles. These innate moral principles are the most fundamental moral tendencies we have, for example towards respecting one’s parents, doing no harm to one’s neighbours, etc. These he distinguishes from derived moral principles which require instruction. Both Bonaventure and Aquinas agree that there are self-evident, innate moral principles of a basic kind present within us, and which we tend to obey without thinking. They also agree that Aristotelian practical reasoning enters into play for the development of understanding of derived moral principles. Both conscience and *synderesis* are therefore partly a question of an innate sense of what is good and right, and partly something one deliberately develops.

In his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas treats of *synderesis* and conscience in his section on the intellectual powers of the soul²⁶. He considers *synderesis* to be a habit and conscience to be an act. Asking firstly, “is *synderesis* a special power of the soul, distinct from the others?” he replies, quoting Aristotle²⁷, that it is not since if it were it would be capable of opposites, whereas, according to him, it “inclines to good only”²⁸. In the following passage he makes it clear that he sees *synderesis* as a habit we have from a natural principle, and which inclines us towards the good and away from the evil:

“I answer that synderesis is not a power but a habit; though some held that it is a power higher than reason; while others said that it is reason itself, not as reason, but as a nature. In order to make this clear we must observe that, as said above (I, Q.79, a.8), man’s act of reasoning, since it is a kind of movement, proceeds from the understanding of

²³ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, bk.2, distinction. 39, article 2, question 1, reply and ad 3, 910, ed. Quaracchi, vol 2.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ Sorabji, op cit., p.61.

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia Q.79 a.12-13

²⁷ *Metaphysics* Bk.7, ch.2.

²⁸ Idem, *On the contrary*.

*certain things – namely, those which are naturally known without any investigation on the part of reason, as from an immovable principle...*²⁹

He goes on to reason that practical reasoning must therefore have practical principles, just as speculative reasoning has speculative principles. He argues that these principles are habits rather than powers, or faculties in themselves. For this he refers to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book 6, chapter 6) where he understands the author to be establishing that there are speculative habits which are not acquired virtues but that it is the proper of the intellect to be of itself (or, by nature, as Aquinas puts it) directed at principles, or sources. In this passage Aristotle is considering the intellectual virtues and proceeding by process of elimination. Without going into the topic of intellectual virtue yet, what Aquinas is using here is the conclusion Aristotle draws that it is proper to the intellect to be directed at principles. Aquinas concludes that there must be principles for both the speculative and practical intelligence, since reasoning starts from some principle. In the case of practical reasoning, the principle it starts from and which the intelligence is naturally inclined to is the good.

Synderesis is therefore an inclination of the intelligence towards principles of action, principles distinguishing good from evil. This would indeed distinguish synderesis from *conscientia*. In the following article Aquinas asks himself whether *conscience* is a power, and answers, as mentioned, that it is rather an act. He bases this on the meaning of conscience as “...*cum alio scientia*, i.e. knowledge applied to an individual case.”³⁰ He continues, saying that we apply knowledge to our actions in three ways; when witnessing, when inciting or binding, and when excusing, accusing or tormenting. All three of these, says Aquinas, follow the application of knowledge to ourselves. He concludes therefore that this application is an action and not a power or a habit.

For Aquinas synderesis is a habit - within the cognitive power of the soul - which we have because we have practical principles by nature, i.e. inclinations to find certain actions abhorrent and others laudable, such as killing one’s neighbour or saving a child from drowning. Because there is a cognitive inclination within our nature to see such actions in this way, a habit of action develops since one is inclined to act in this way over and over again. Conscience does also not refer to a separate capacity but rather to certain type of action: a judgement of the intelligence considering one’s actions for their moral value. Conscience is therefore not a habit developed naturally out of a natural inclination of the mind, but rather a habit developed deliberately out of singular judgements which produce an inclination to see or recognise particular actions or types of action as having a particular moral value. For Aquinas synderesis and conscience are therefore very close, both being types of intellectual habit with regard to the moral value of one’s actions. In fact, as Sorabji points out, the two are so close that William of Ockham (ca. 1285-1347/1349) did away with synderesis on the basis that it was redundant with regard to conscience, while Sorabji argues that Ockham and, subsequently, Luther and Calvin’s (along with protestant theology in general) dropping of synderesis was largely due to theological belief in the human person’s profound *loss* of such a natural moral inclination through sin. Are synderesis and conscience actually the same thing? In his distinction of the two Aquinas refers to Aristotle’s distinction between two activities of the intelligence; one directed at ultimate, universal truths, and the other at individual particulars. For Aquinas, the first is where we get synderesis from and the second, concerned with individual actions, is where conscience comes into play. A natural, general sense of good and bad, and the particular circumstances in which one needs then to discern where the good and bad lie. It would therefore make sense to conclude that Aquinas would see a link between his understanding of conscience and Aristotle’s *phronesis*, the practical intelligence’s work of discernment in matters of action. Although Aquinas does not make this connection explicitly it seems easy to see that he gives role to conscience – as a moral judgement upon individual actions.

²⁹ Op. Cit., *I answer that*.

³⁰ Op.Cit., a.13, *I answer that*.

At this point it would seem fair to conclude that with Aquinas the term conscience arrived at a point which invited a more developed investigation of the term in the light of Aristotelian ethics. Bonaventure had championed a root for conscience in the will, through synderesis. Aquinas refers explicitly to Aristotle with regard to synderesis – as a natural habit – and implicitly with regard to conscience – an action which is a part of the practical intelligence. To our knowledge an Aristotelian view on conscience has not been further explored and the centuries between Bonaventure and Aquinas’ time and ours have seen a far more intellectualised version concept of conscience emerge that they envisaged. Scholastic theology post-Aquinas had a tendency to intellectualise the human person and Aquinas’ references to Aristotelian realism were not always respected when he was read and commented on. Conscience remained a subject of interest, especially among Christian theologians and philosophers and made several appearances in the centuries after Aquinas³¹. According to Sorabji, Kant, in the eighteenth century, was perhaps the last philosopher to give conscience a clear and positive role in his ethics. Although Nietzsche, Newman and Freud subsequently also gave serious attention to the topic, Kant offers us the clearest example of how a highly cognitive ethics, on the other end of the spectrum with regard to Aristotelian realism, saw conscience as a purely cognitive thing. In what follows we would like to try and explore what could be drawn out of Aristotle’s ethics on the topic of conscience. We will first look at what conscience looks like in Kant’s philosophy in order to see what a modern – and highly rationalised – concept of conscience has to offer.

³¹ Sorabji offers a useful historical overview of the term, mentioning the following post-medieval writers – not all of whom dealt with the topic philosophically - who touched on the topic of conscience, mostly in relation to the question of freedom of conscience: William of Ockham (1287-1347), John Wyclif (1330-1384), Jan Hus (1371-1414), Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564), Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Oliver Cromwell (1599-16588), Roger Williams (1603-1684), John Milton (1608-1674), John Locke (1632-1702), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), Joseph Butler (1692-1752), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Henry Newman (1801-1890), Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Mahatma Ghandi (1869-1948). This list is not exhaustive and one might in particular want to add Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980).

II The Kantian concept of conscience

In this section we would like to take Kant as one example among others of a modern concept of the moral conscience. We are not claiming that he represents all ideas on conscience in the modern period since others, such as Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Nietzsche and Freud, also have contributions on the topic. However, an exhaustive survey of these ideas and concepts would overflow the bounds of this kind of thesis. We have chosen Kant since among post-Cartesian philosophers he is an eminent example of the highly rationalised vision of human existence which offered a certain room for growth to conscience as a concept. By seeing what Kant says about moral conscience we will have a useful, albeit non-exhaustive backdrop against which to evaluate whether or not further or different approaches are needed to account for and do justice to what we mean by the term in ordinary parlance.

In order to grasp the role moral conscience has in Kant's ethics we will first need to outline the main aspects of his ethical philosophy. Only then will we be able to see the place he gives to moral conscience.

II.1. The foundations of Kant's ethics

Let us first identify the background ethics has in Kant's philosophy and how he approaches the domain of human action.

Completed four years after the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (henceforth referred to as "*Critique*") two years after his *Prolegomena to any future metaphysics* (henceforth referred to as "*Prolegomena*"), Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (henceforth referred to as "*GMM*") is a highly useful initiation into his practical philosophy, showing clearly how his moral philosophy is a continuation or application of his critical method in the domain of action. In his opening paragraphs Kant remains entirely faithful to the philosophy he had established in his long prepared previous two works. Philosophy, according to Kant, has two major domains, as the Greeks had already pointed out; speculative and practical. For Kant this means logic and morals. Then there is the domain of physics, dealing with the purely material which is subjected to laws of nature. This is how Kant outlines the domain he intended to treat in his GMM:

*All rational cognition of either material and concerned with some object, or formal and occupied only with the form of the understanding and of reason itself and with the universal rules of thinking in general, without distinction of objects. Formal philosophy is called logic, whereas material philosophy, which has to do with determinate objects and the laws to which they are subject, is in turn divided into two. For these laws are either laws of nature or laws of freedom. The science of the first is called physics, that of the other is ethics; the former is also called the doctrine of nature, the latter the doctrine of morals.*³²

These opening remarks set a clear course for investigating the domain of human action – ethics – as an inquiry into material rational cognition, or philosophy. A number of things are simply stated in this passage since Kant has already established what he claims knowledge and philosophy are. In order to be able to follow his reasoning and assumptions in this, his first critical work on ethics, we will need to turn briefly to his explanation of understanding. In this way we will see that ethics becomes, for Kant, a type of metaphysics since, he claims, it is concerned with discovering the laws governing the physical, i.e. what he will call *synthetic a priori principles* governing concrete, particular action. The rest of ethics is purely rational and practical reasoning will be concerned with application of moral laws to concrete, particular actions, circumstances and emotions. What exactly does this mean for what action is and what it means to act well, or morally? What can be said of choice in this understanding of human acting? We will see that the deliberation central to Aristotle's choice and characteristic of his practical judgement has in

³² *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, 4.387, I. Kant, (1998) Cambridge University Press.

Kant's vision of things an entirely different task, that of finding universally applicable principles and subjugating subjective desires, inclinations and circumstances to them.

The object of our study is not Kant's theory of reason. However an overview of this theory is essential to our goal of investigating its application in his theory of ethics. We will first recap his theory of understanding and then look closely at his *GMM* and *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Kant's claim, in the opening passages of the preface to *GMM*³³, that Ancient Greek metaphysics is, along with logic, a subdivision of "pure" philosophy (based on knowledge prior to experience) is a debatable one, though it indicates perhaps that his own starting point in philosophy was firmly cognitive. He goes on to claim that logic is concerned solely...

*"...with the form of the understanding and of reason itself and with the universal rules of thinking in general, without distinction of objects."*³⁴

The subsequent statement, that material rational cognition has to do with "determinate objects" and the "laws to which they are subject", and how this is the foundation of his ethical inquiry, is something we will need to return to later. For now, let us look at why philosophy and human understanding is, for Kant, a question of logic, or "rational cognition".

Although the criticism Kant levels at both experience-based knowledge and the systematic metaphysics which Locke, on the one hand, and Wolff and Leibniz on the other, respectively represented before him, ends up having larger scope than merely the empiricism and metaphysics these writers stood for, it is fair to say that Kant's *Critique* sets out to provide an alternative to them. The question for Kant at the outset seems to be about whether metaphysics is possible. Is it capable of providing us with knowledge, and especially about God, freedom and immortality? There is some initial doubt about this in Kant's mind. This doubt come from the Newtonian emergence of the physical sciences, as we now know them, and the Cartesian revolution. It is widely accepted that Descartes is responsible for the introduction of doubt into the engine room of philosophical inquiry, i.e. into the capacity of the intelligence to know anything for sure. Kant rightly sees metaphysics as the most fundamental inquiry in philosophy, an inquiry which seeks and, until his redefinition of it, claimed to have ground for developing knowledge of things as they really *are*, and not in so far as they are known to the knower. As we know, Descartes initiated this shift in subject matter of metaphysics by placing knowledge of the knower at the forefront of his metaphysical inquiry. While Kant diverges from Descartes on many counts, on this point he was consistent with him and his *Critique* inaugurated a metaphysics which he claimed extends to all knowledge and faithfully develops the Cartesian starting point of the *cogito* and the logical character of all subsequent philosophical inquiry. Kant's critical investigation into the powers of pure reason itself was therefore an attempt to see if metaphysics could be re-founded upon the Cartesian principle of starting inquiry with the knower's knowledge. Kant accuses at least his immediate predecessors (Leibniz and Wolff) of having developed so called metaphysical doctrine...

*"...without having inquired in what way and with what right reason has arrived at these principles. Dogmatism is thus the dogmatic procedure of the pure reason without previous criticism of its own powers."*³⁵

While innate ideas became Descartes' proposed explanation of how one arrives at knowledge in spite of sense experience's unreliability, this is perhaps the most fundamental point on which Kant differs

³³ *Idem*, 4:387-388.

³⁴ *Idem*.

³⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason*, B, xxxv, I. Kant, (1998) Cambridge University Press.

completely with his predecessor. He endeavours not to find out where knowledge comes from, but how reason itself works. A well-known statement is of use here:

*“That all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt... But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises out of experience.”*³⁶

According to Kant, the cognitive faculty requires to be brought into activity by our senses and their objects. But to arrive at understanding of these objects, *a priori* elements are necessary. These *a priori* elements are not fully formed ideas, innate to the mind and pre-existing sense experience. Reason has therefore above all to do with these *a priori* elements, and sense experience can be seen as the accessory occasion for the development and usage of that knowledge. Why would Kant turn to such a theory? Here we can see convergence of more than one initial assumption for Kant. The first we have already mentioned: Cartesian distrust of sense-perception as a starting point for knowledge of their objects. The second can be seen in his respect for Newtonian science.

*“The genuine method of metaphysics is fundamentally of the same kind as that which Newton introduced into material science and which was there so fruitful”*³⁷

Newton was perhaps most famous for the way in which he envisaged science dealing with sense experience and impressions. To move from the confused jumble of sense information involved in our sense experience to a purified knowledge of the physical laws governing our senses’ objects was, according to Newton, the work of the physical sciences. Kant clearly intended to emulate this method.

*“...why is it that no sure path of science has yet been found? Is it perhaps impossible to find one?”*³⁸

His intent is to find out whether metaphysics can be shown to survive the Cartesian revolution without having recourse to divinely infused innate ideas, i.e. to a form of *fideism*. If not, then nothing will withhold metaphysics from being annihilated by Lockean empiricism or condemned to the pure, unfounded dogmatism he accuses metaphysics to have fallen into with Wolff and Leibniz. Kant outlines his aims at the start of the first edition of his *Critique* as:

*“nothing else than the critical investigation of pure reason itself”, in other words, “a critical inquiry into the faculty of reason with reference to all the cognitions to which it may strive to attain independently of all experience.”*³⁹

Metaphysics is, for Kant, a question of what the mind can know apart from sense experience. He is concerned with cognition prior to all experience, and refers to this as the conditions in a human being for knowing objects. These *a priori* conditions of knowledge are therefore transcendental. What Kant does not mean by *a priori* cognition is knowledge which exists in our mind prior to experience. He means knowledge which is not derived from experience but which becomes knowledge of an object through experience. What would give Kant the grounds for thinking that such *a priori* cognition exists and is possible? This is perhaps the point at which Kant is most clearly guided by Newtonian science since he gives a certain kind of necessity and universality centre stage in human knowledge and this leads him to speak of knowledge as coming from *a priori* cognition. Whereas Aristotle speaks of necessity and universality as belonging to knowledge derived inductively and analogically from experience of particulars which begins with the senses and arrives at what holds “for the most part”⁴⁰, Kant takes the Humean

³⁶ Idem, B, 1.

³⁷ *Inquiry into the distinctness of the principles of natural theology and morals*, 2, W., II, p.286, I. Kant, (2011) Cambridge University Press.

³⁸ *Critique*, B xv.

³⁹ Idem, A xii.

⁴⁰ An Aristotelian key-phrase to be found throughout his works, for example in *NE 1094 b12-17*

route on this. One cannot, according to Hume and Kant, arrive at necessity and universality through experience. Yet, knowledge being of matter (individual objects given to the senses) and of form, necessity and universality are what knowledge is most concerned with. Universality extrapolated from experience is fatally prone to exceptions. Strict universality cannot be of this order. The fact that we know things which are strictly universal and necessary, as we do in mathematics, is, according to Kant, a sign of *a priori* knowledge:

“...necessity and strict universality are sure marks of a priori knowledge and are inseparably connected with one another”⁴¹

Kant’s claim is therefore that both pure knowledge of universals and necessity - as in mathematics - and impure knowledge – where concepts derived from experience are included – is *a priori* since no amount of sense experience and analogically generated induction will arrive at *necessity* or *universality*. The existence of *a priori* knowledge in mathematics and physics is obvious and immediate, says Kant. It is far less so in metaphysics and Kant endeavours to investigate this.

The problem for Kant with metaphysics is that it claims to say things about things, i.e. to make not just self-verifying⁴², explicative (or analytic) judgements – where the predicate is contained within the subject (Kant’s example is “all bodies are extended) – but what he called “augmentative judgements”⁴³, such as “all bodies are heavy”, which he also called “synthetic judgements”. Synthetic judgements are therefore ones where the attribute is not contained in the subject by necessity and arrived at analytically but is rather connected to the subject. The nature of this connection may be *a posteriori* in that knowledge of it is arrived at through experience of particulars. An *a posteriori* synthetic judgement, even when arrived at through extensive experience, will never be able to pretend to universality and strict necessity, based as it is upon particular experiences of material things and not being an intrinsic part of the concept of the subject. But, says Kant – and here we arrive at the grounds proper he finds for metaphysics – there *are* synthetic judgements about necessary and universal attributes of a subject, and these are therefore *a priori*. The example he gives is causality in events: “Every alteration has its cause.”⁴⁴ Kant claims that this kind of judgement is not the result of experience. Knowing that all events have a cause might involve experience in the knowing of exactly what events and causes are, but the causal relationship between one thing and another is, claims Kant, known *a priori* and therefore does *not* emerge from experience. This claim has by no means gone unquestioned or been broadly accepted. What argumentation does Kant offer to support his claim?

“First of all, it must be noted that mathematical propositions proper are always judgements a priori and not empirical, because they include the concept of necessity.”⁴⁵

A calculation, for example, cannot be said to be analytic (since its necessity is immediately obvious), yet nor are the terms involved derived from experience, says Kant. It is both synthetic and not derived from experience. It is also intuitive for the same reason it is not analytic. It is therefore a synthetic *a priori* judgement.

Kant believed that there are synthetic *a priori* judgements in other fields of knowledge. Geometry and physics contain many, but more importantly for this study, he believed that metaphysics and morals

⁴¹ Idem, B 4.

⁴² F. Copleston provides a clear explanation of Kant’s analytic and synthetic judgements in *A History of Philosophy*, volume 6, p. 219

⁴³ Idem, B 11, A 7.

⁴⁴ Idem, B 3, A 9.

⁴⁵ Idem, B 14.

also contained synthetic *a priori* judgements. How he develops this theory of synthetic *a priori* propositions in metaphysics will be of importance for his moral and practical theory afterwards. Kant has already ruled out the thought that knowledge may be derived *from* experience. Neither is metaphysics, by definition, directly concerned with the empirical. Yet it *is* concerned with saying true things *about* the objects of our knowledge. It follows that it “*consists simply of synthetic a priori propositions.*”⁴⁶ How does one arrive at such propositions? Any possibility for simple correspondence of understanding with regard to its empirical object seems to disappear at this point. Yet Kant adamantly refused pure rationalism (especially later on, in his defensive work *Groundwork for Philosophy of Nature*) and wanted to find a way to maintain the physical, empirical object as more than a mere unaccounted for given. Maintaining the theory of synthetic *a priori* knowledge about metaphysical aspects of the empirical objects of our mind requires a more rational root than correspondence – since for Kant, as we have seen, knowledge must be of universals and of necessity, which the particular cannot offer – and yet, if it is to claim to be knowledge of the object, empirical aspects included, it also requires some link with the physical and particular. Kant provided the following solution:

*“Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to ascertain anything about them a priori by concepts, and thus to extend our knowledge, came to nothing on this assumption. Let us try, then, whether we may not make better progress in the tasks of metaphysics if we assume that objects must conform to our knowledge. This at all events accords better with the possibility which we are seeking, namely of a knowledge of objects a priori, which would determine something about them before they are given to us.”*⁴⁷

Convinced that *a priori* knowledge exists and also convinced that knowledge of individual objects does not come from sense experience of those objects, Kant proposes a Copernican revolution in metaphysics. As Frederick Copleston puts it:

*“What he is suggesting is that we cannot know things, that they cannot be objects of knowledge for us, except in so far as they are subjected to certain a priori conditions of knowledge on the part of the subject.”*⁴⁸

Considered rapidly and from a considerable distance the problem Kant is attempting to vaguely recalls Aristotle’s investigation of the passive and active intellect in that Aristotle also considers that since the proper object of the intellect is the intelligible form, this aspect of the object is only actuated when known by the intellect. His famous “*os phos*”, “as light”, does not mean that the object is bereft of the intelligible form until it is known, but that the intelligible form is not expressed as such until it is grasped by a knower. What *Kant* means is quite different. In *his* proposal the mind imposes forms of cognition upon the material object and can only *know* an object through the intermediary of such a form which it possesses *a priori*. Kant’s claim is that our knowledge of necessity and universality, given its non-empirically derived character, points better to a way of knowing objects where what those objects are (their forms), is imposed upon the empirical object and come from *a priori* cognition. It behoves a knowing subject to project intelligibility onto empirical phenomena. “Object” means for Kant “object of knowledge”. If we take the direct object of the mind to be *what* a thing is (and not *whether*) then there is indeed no reason not to go along with Kant and say that since the “what” is concerned with the form of things, and since the empirical object does not provide us with knowledge of the form, then that knowledge must be *applied* to particular things. According to this we only know things through our subjective consciousness, i.e. through the lens of the subjective *a priori* conditions or forms of knowledge. In order to have understanding of the world around us we need to consider - as mathematics and physics had done since Newton - that objects must conform to the mind rather than the mind to objects. Kant does not intend this in a radical sense, i.e. that things only exist when we think of them. He means that

⁴⁶ Idem, B 18.

⁴⁷ Idem, B xvi.

⁴⁸ *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 6, p.225, F. Copleston, (1960) Burns & Oates.

our knowledge of *what something is*, is a dimension of the thing in question which comes from the intelligence which knows and possesses the categories of knowledge to which the thing belongs.

“There are two sources of human knowledge, which⁴⁹ perhaps spring from a common but to us unknown root, namely sensibility and understanding. Through the former objects are given to us; through the latter they are thought.”

This does not mean that Kant says that the material given object is somehow void of form until it is thought. The objects of our experience are already a synthesis of matter and form, only in sense-experience this knowledge remains intuitive and unclear. It requires the pure concepts or categories of understanding to make clear one's understanding of the object in question. As Copleston puts it:

“The formation of the pure concepts or categories of the understanding is thus to synthesise the manifold of sense: their use lies in their application to the data of sense intuition.”⁵⁰

Understanding is therefore the clarification of what things are, done by applying *a priori* knowledge of concepts to the hitherto unclear and intuitive sense experience. Only our understanding, which has *a priori* knowledge of universals and of the necessary, can bring knowledge of the form, even though the form itself is also indirectly present in the object being considered. Kant also thought that there are certain ideas which are transcendent to all experience, such as the idea of God or of the spiritual soul. He claims that these ideas, which apply themselves to no sense-experience, are not ideal forms but rather the result of our mind's tendency to seek “*unconditional principles of unity*”. This - the soul as principle of thought and God as principle of being - would be ideas resulting from a tendency we have to seek an unconditional principle of unity in, respectively, the categorical thinking we do and the experiences we have of different objects.

Although these “transcendental Ideas” regulate, guide and encourage our endeavours to seek progress in scientific understanding of the complex physical whole we live in, Kant does not believe they can be experienced in themselves, nor that they provide any kind of knowledge about realities. Neither does Kant's metaphysics lie in these Ideas. Metaphysics is not a science of transcendental realities but rather the transcendental knowledge comprised of all *a priori* cognition, foundational to all scientific knowledge of objects. Metaphysics is therefore, for Kant, concerned with universals and necessities, and is a knowledge and thinking foundational to scientific knowledge. This foundational role does at least two important things which will have considerable influence on, among other domains, his moral philosophy. It removes these transcendental Ideas from the physical world and therefore from measurement or proof by means of phenomena. Yet it also claims for them the very role of structure of the *a priori* cognition so central to all our understanding of objects. Such Ideas are not an object of knowledge but are founding Ideas for the seeking of knowledge. They are therefore subjects of *belief*, not of knowledge, and have to do with consciousness rather than experience. They belong to the practical rather than the speculative domain.

We have mentioned the spiritual, or immortal, soul and the existence of God, but freedom was also one such transcendental Idea according to Kant. Although all things, humans included, are subjected to the scientific laws of necessity determined by *a priori* forms or understanding, these laws concern that which *a priori* knowledge concerns and no more. As we have seen, Kant did not see *a priori* concepts as being the source or creator of reality, but only as the source of knowledge of the objects of our sense-experience. It is therefore perfectly possible for there to exist realities outside the bounds of scientific laws. Transcendental Ideas are such things. We can therefore have an idea of freedom, i.e. of possibility of action, which extends beyond the limits of what we can understand to be able to take place in the

⁴⁹ *Critique*, B 29, A 19.

⁵⁰ *Op. Cit.*, vol. 6, p.230.

physical world. Moral, or practical consciousness therefore contains the Idea of freedom. One of the major difficulties with this theory is that Kant sees, as mentioned, our existence as *determined* by the laws of science. Physical limitation and moral freedom could be reconciled, but determination and freedom – when not coming from the same agent – are difficult to combine. Either one is free to act, or one is not. Let us now consider more closely how Kant sees moral reason, i.e. how we make our moral judgements and come to understanding of what to do.

II.2. Kant's practical reasoning

True to his philosophical intentions of finding the rational foundation of all our knowledge, Kant sees morality as the endeavour to find the principles and categories of *a priori* knowledge which explain our understanding in action. The central issue in his moral philosophy is therefore what one *ought* to do, i.e. the understanding of how one would behave if one were to act in accordance with determined, synthetic *a priori* knowledge of action. Practical reason is therefore reason as Kant means it in general, but used in a particular way: applied to situations where the object of reason is *action*. In this way Kant sees practical reason as *creating its own object*. It has to do with:

“...the grounds of the determination of the will; which is a power either of producing its objects corresponding to ideas or of determining itself to produce them (whether the physical power to do so is sufficient or not), that is, of determining its causality.”⁵¹

Practical reason is a question of realisation, the bringing about of choices which are in accordance with moral *a priori* knowledge, i.e. with a moral law. Since morality is a question of choosing and acting in accordance with an already known moral law, each person is therefore source of the object of their actions. There are empirical circumstances to be taken into consideration in situations of particular moral choices and actions and knowledge of these empirical factors means that there is also *a posteriori* knowledge in the practical domain. Kant distinguishes *a posteriori* practical knowledge from the *a priori* practical knowledge, or *metaphysics of morals*, which is concerned with the pure principles of moral judgement. He distinguishes therefore between metaphysics of morals and “applied ethics” which applies the principles of the former to the concrete conditions of human nature. This distinction has met with criticism since Kant's metaphysical morality included fair amounts of reference to empirical conditions. However, his main line of argument is this:

“...the basis of obligation must not be sought in human nature or in the circumstances of the world in which he (man) is placed, but a priori simply in the concepts of pure reason.”⁵²

As we will now outline, morality in Kant's system of thought has particular hallmarks essential to its structure but also runs into some complications which are difficult to find a way out of. The first hallmark is a practical reason which, as part of pure reason, functions with *a priori* concepts, called to be synthesised with empirical phenomena, along with some underlying transcendental Ideas. Following from this, imperatives of a duty-bound will in accordance with practical reason, are the essential activity of the morally good person. And finally, the whole explanation of a duty-bound, imperative-giving will implies freedom which, though its existence is only justified with some mental acrobatics, is clearly necessary if Kant wishes to maintain more than a semblance of agency and morality on the whole. But it is most enlightening to first consider Kant's well-known opening remarks in his GMM:

⁵¹ CPR, 29-30.

⁵² GMM Preface, p.389, abb.4

“It is impossible to conceive of anything in the world, or indeed out of it, which can be called good without qualification save only a good will.”⁵³

Why is it that Kant considers a good will as being worthy of the description “good without qualification”, and what is a “good will”? For Kant, a good will is one which is source of action which is obedient to understanding’s categories and principles. When the categories and principles of conduct are considered in so far as they concern the individual’s choices and actions, they are duties, i.e. things which one is obliged to do in order that one’s life be ordered according to what one is conscious it should be or become. Action for the sake of duty is action which corresponds to synthetic *a priori* propositions. It is the leading of a life according to universal, necessary principles, which rise above the singular and particular. The moral law, in Kant’s eyes, could not possibly lie further from passionate desires of the individual.

“Duty is the necessity of acting out of reverence for the law.”⁵⁴

Law, in Kant’s terminology, means law in the *scientific* sense, i.e. that which is universal.

“As I have robbed the will of all impulses which could arise for it from following any particular law, there remains nothing but the universal conformity of actions to law in general, which should serve the will as a principle. That is to say, I am never to act otherwise than so that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”⁵⁵

As a reader of Kant will know, his maxims differ from his principles in that the former are the subjective “laws” of the individual which may or may not be conform to *a priori* principles. The nature, or form of law being universality, its application to action means the conformity of action to universality. This, says Kant, is the guiding principle of the moral life.

Yet in order for the categorical imperative to be truly imperative – action commanding – Kant needed to show that there is a synthetic *a priori* connection between it and the concept of “will” in a rational being:

“Assuming that there is something the existence of which has in itself absolute value, something which, as an end in itself could be the ground of determinate laws, then in it and in it alone would lie the ground of a possible categorical imperative, i.e. of a practical law.”⁵⁶

Is it *necessary* that all rational beings conform their actions to the categorical? Is the moral law also an imperative for action, i.e. a duty? For the formulations of the categorical imperative leave no doubt about it being something active:

“Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of Nature.”⁵⁷

Saying that the will finds in an *end* the objective grounds for its self-determination, Kant then looks for an end which will fit the requirements of *a priori* knowledge. Such an end cannot be one merely desired by the subject. It cannot also be a means, i.e. an intermediary end, since this would make it hypothetical and so non-necessary.

⁵³ GMM Preface, p.389-90, Abb.p.4

⁵⁴ GMM, 4.400

⁵⁵ GMM, 4.402

⁵⁶ GMM, 4.428

⁵⁷ GMM, 4.436

“...it must be one which, being derived from the conception of that which is necessarily an end for everyone because it is an end in itself, constitutes an objective principle of the will, and can thus serve as a universal practical law.”⁵⁸

The solution Kant finds is to say that the existence of rational beings is in itself the end for the sake of which rational beings exist

“The ground of this principle [a practical law, i.e. a law governing and commanding action] is: a rational nature exists as an end in itself... The practical imperative will thus be as follows: so, act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, always at the same time as an end, and never merely as a means.”⁵⁹

This formulation of the categorical imperative as reposing upon an end which is any and every rational will, creates a principle of autonomy of the will. He describes this principle as the “supreme principle of morality”⁶⁰. We come therefore to the legislator-subject vision of Kant’s moral person, and his kingdom of ends concept of society. However, another element is required if Kant is to show that *practical synthetic a priori* imperatives are possible. On the one hand, he wants the moral life to be governed by categorical knowledge, i.e. from universal and necessary laws with all the independence from the empirical that this entails. And on the other hand, he wants it to be synthetic, i.e. including experience with regard to - i.e. knowledge of – the particular. How is a practical synthetic *a priori* proposition possible? The categorical imperative such as Kant formulates it involves a subject bound by an obligation. The obligation cannot be found analytically in the concept of a rational will and yet, in order to be of categorical nature, action predicated must be bound to the subject. It is a *categorical* imperative and necessarily binds the will to act. Kant proposes the idea of *freedom* as the necessary condition making the *a priori* synthetic proposition of the categorical imperative possible.

“Obviously, what he does is to look for the necessary condition of the possibility of obligation and of acting for the sake of duty alone, in accordance with a categorical imperative; and he finds this necessary condition in the idea of freedom.”⁶¹

Though the will is, through right reason, *subject* of the moral law, it is also the *legislator* of that same law and free to apply it or not. Metaphysical, transcendental freedom is, according to Kant, something we cannot prove but have to admit as the necessary condition for the set-up he sees man to be in, namely that of being able to disobey the moral law his practical reason dictates to him.

Where does this leave us in our search to understand what Kant thinks about moral conscience? Before we look at the relevant passages themselves and consider the corresponding secondary literature, let us summarise our findings. Rational cognition is concerned with finding the “universal rules of thinking in general”, says Kant. Categories of reason existing *a priori* in the human mind provide principles and laws which govern the physical and are therefore synthetic *a priori* principles when applied by reason to particular objects. This goes also for practical reason which is thus knowledge of particulars.

II.3. What does this allow us to imply about Kant’s understanding of the conscience?

For Kant, the existence of what he calls conscience arises from the obvious needs, in his moral system, to be able to reflect upon and critically judge one's application of, and obedience to the moral law. Conscience is a reflection or evaluation of this and he compares having a conscience to having an inner court of law. In an article on Kant's conscience, Allen Wood assesses the following passages from Kant:

⁵⁸ GMM, 4:428-9

⁵⁹ GMM, 4:429

⁶⁰ *Idem*, 4:440

⁶¹ *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 6, p.333, F. Copleston (1960) Burns & Oates.

"Conscience is practical reason holding the human being's duty before him for his acquittal or condemnation in every case that comes under the law."⁶²

"The inner judicial proceeding of conscience may be aptly compared with an external court of law. There we find within us an accuser, who could not exist, however, if there were no law though the latter is no part of the civil positive law, but resides in reason... In addition, there is also at the same time in the human being an advocate, namely self-love, who excuses him and makes many an objection to the accusation, whereupon the accuser seeks in turn to rebut the objections. Lastly, we find in ourselves a judge, who either acquits or condemns us."⁶³

"Every concept of duty involves objective constraint through a law (a moral imperative limiting our freedom) and belongs to practical understanding, which provides a rule. But the internal imputation of a deed, as a case falling under law, belongs to the faculty of judgement, which, as the subjective principle of imputing an action, judges with rightful force whether the action as a deed (an action coming under law) has occurred or not. Upon it follows the conclusion of reason (the verdict), that is, the connecting or rightful result with the action (condemnation or acquittal). All of this takes place before a judicial proceeding, which, as a moral person giving effect to a law, is called a court. Consciousness of an inner court in the human being is conscience."⁶⁴

Allen Wood comments: *"To say that the court is 'inner' means that the different persons involved in it (the 'accuser', 'defender' and 'judge') are all found within a single moral agent. The idea that a human being can contain distinct 'persons' in this sense is basic to Kant's conception of moral agency and to moral legislation as self-given (autonomy). To be a morally self-directing rational being for Kant entails that there be within you both a legislator (as author of obligation which gives the law) and a subject of the legislation (which is obligated by it) ... For Kant, the author of moral laws is 'the idea of every rational will as giving universal law' (GMM), that is, the pure rational concept of each of us, which cannot be exhibited empirically."⁶⁵*

Wood goes on to point out that this notion of conscience as a gathering of different moral persons within the individual is important to the autonomy of Kant's individual. Perhaps when speaking of conscience in Kant we should say that it is a question of *holding court* within oneself. *"The principle of morality is for Kant a 'moral law', legislated within each of us by our own reason."⁶⁶*

It would seem clear, with a view to the self-limitation of freedom that is the moral law, that if Kant is to translate transcendental freedom into the practical autonomy of the individual, then the individual must pronounce on the innocence or guilt of the internal workings of their morality; one moral person judging another for their actions, within the same natural person. *"Conscience is always a reflection on one's actions in which the issue, as in a criminal court, is guilt or innocence. This too is meant literally, not metaphorically, even though in the case of conscience the law is not an external or coercive one, but an ethical law, whose obedience must always be a matter of inner self-restraint."⁶⁷*

As Wood explains, Kant's conscience is a reflection conducted by reason which, in a certain sense, compares actions and the practical reasoning involved, with the moral law we have discussed above. As Wood underlines, there is then also, for Kant, a resulting conscience-as-feeling. The love or displeasure one experiences following the verdict is a *consequence* of the verdict. It is presumably also a feeling produced when one projects to do or not to do something. In this sense it can also act as a warning.

⁶² *Metaphysics of Morals*, I. Kant, 6:400-1

⁶³ *Vorlesungen über Ethik, Kants Schriften*, p.354, Bd. XXVII. (1996) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁶⁴ *Metaphysics of Morals*, I. Kant, 6:438-1

⁶⁵ *Kant on conscience*, A. Wood, in *Kantovski Sbornik*.

⁶⁶ *Idem*.

⁶⁷ *Idem*

Having looked at what conscience is for Kant and how it fits into his ethics, we are now able to identify some of its key characteristics. Does Kant give us a satisfactory account of moral conscience? And, to the extent that Kant does not, does Aristotle have a useful contribution on the topic?

As we could see by the end of part one, the development of what moral conscience is reached in the Middle Ages a point at which there was some controversy about whether it is primarily cognitive or voluntary.

III An Aristotelian contribution to understanding conscience

Let us cast a brief glance back to the remarks about the term conscience with which we began this thesis. People use the term conscience today to mean more than cold knowledge of right and wrong. We very often use it to refer to a *feeling* or *sense* of right and wrong or at least to a comfort or, more often, discomfort with actions completed or projected. Yet such feelings or intuitions do often lead us to reflect and seek to understand or know whether they are correct or rather the result of unfounded fears or imaginations or, on the contrary, of insensitivity to the gravity of an action. Kant offers us a highly rationalised account of conscience where one's sense of duty in the light of the moral law is central; a critical awareness of how one's actions compare to one's knowledge of what is right. But this does not seem to us to account for conscience as a feeling or sense. The ancient Greek notion of *knowing-with-oneself*, and the accompanying emotions of guilt or tranquillity which the playwrights included on this topic, seem to urge the same call for a concept of conscience which takes more than knowledge into account. As we noted towards the end of part one, Aquinas, adding his thoughts to those of Paul of Tarsus, Jerome and Bonaventure (where the discussion circled around a possible role of the will in conscience), offers the idea of a way to see a model or schema for viewing conscience in the context of Aristotle's conceptions of practical reasoning, habit acquisition and character formation. If we are to seek a concept of moral conscience in which the ethical action involves more than just doing the right thing and where the practical thinking involves more than just intellect or understanding of the right action, we may do well to turn to Aristotle. In this part of our thesis we will look at the role thinking plays in *NE* and how Aristotle's concept of character formation involves a) interdependent virtues of thinking and of character, b) a stress on habit formation and ingrained disposition in both types of virtue, c) a special virtue to do with decision making, and d) a recognition of the central role played by the imagination or "appearance formation" in the forming of intellectual insights. Aristotle does not mention the term conscience in his ethics but we will attempt to see whether he offers the necessary tools for a more complete concept of conscience than we have to date.

III.1. Aristotle's ethics and the central importance of *phronesis*

In *NE*, Aristotle, like almost all his predecessors and contemporaries, was addressing the question of how we can best live our lives given the fact that we seem to have some possibility to determine what we do and what that will result in, and also have preferences for some things above others. Like the Cynics before him, he begins his *Ethics* by observing that everyone seeks to reach happiness, though he immediately remarks that this appears to be an analogical concept, happiness lying for different people in different things. This leads him to say that the central characteristic of human happiness, and that upon which it depends, is the desired, sought-after and possessed end, that which one loves above all else. How to make progress towards the finding of such an end happen, and how to live a life in harmony with it, is the ethical challenge that lies before anyone who loves one thing above all else. Observing that we have some difficulty doing this and that there is a greater or lesser natural disposition of character towards that which we desire, Aristotle begins to examine our different possibilities to give shape to our own character; his famous distinction between *ethos* and *êthos*⁶⁸ at the heart of his books on virtue of character. Virtue is a question of deliberately developing a certain affective and intellectual familiarity with, and preference for the kind of actions which favour proximity to one's desired and ultimate end, or to the kind of thing capable of being an end for a human. Of key importance though, is that these actions cannot be reduced to a standard set of specific actions one does or withholds from doing, but require both affective familiarity and preference, and a constant assessing of what exactly is best or good to do or to withhold from doing. Virtue, though an acquired condition, or habit, cannot be a list of

⁶⁸ The many layers involved in Aristotle's character formation include, as we shall have occasion to see later on, a natural foundation (1103a 23-26) inclining towards habits, *ethos* (1103a 19-23), which is not necessarily virtue but simply any action we have, through repetition, a pattern of behaviour in. It requires virtue, deliberately developed active conditions, to develop *êthos*, or moral character (1111b 5-6, 1139a 33-35).

specific actions but rather a developed condition of thought and behaviour which means one seeks a particular type of action in all circumstances: that action which favours most one's ultimate end. This impossibility of separating virtue from assessment, deliberation and choice means that the intelligence is central to Aristotle's ethics, which is therefore a life of desiring and choice-making. Practical judgement – acquired through a plethora of experiences of particulars – is the habit of thinking that is necessary for virtue of character. How is it possible for such thinking to become a habit? The questions this raises are numerous. What does Aristotle mean exactly by “habit”, or virtue, and how is a virtue of character different to a pattern of nature? How great, or small, is the possibility of the intelligence to identify what is good, and what *is*, for that matter, and to influence or even determine the way I relate to it? We need to first of all establish with precision what Aristotle says about the good, character, virtue, choice and deliberation, and then we will be able to consider his *phronesis* and how exactly the intellect could develop and habit, or virtue. Establishing exactly how the intelligence is involved in action and character formation will put us in a position to see what Aristotle's concept of practical intelligence is able to offer to the question of what conscience is, conscience presumably having something to do with a moral judgement with regard to one's actions.

Let us examine the points of departure of Aristotle's ethics and see what role thinking plays in this practical area, concerned with how we can best act.

III.2. Practical reasoning and actions' ends

Strikingly, *NE* begins with three things Aristotle underlines in our activities. “*All art and inquiry, as well as all actions and choices are aimed at some good*”⁶⁹. That which is good can therefore be defined as that at which things aim. G. Richardson Lear emphasises this in his chapter *Happiness and the structure of ends*, on Aristotle's *telos*-structured ethics. Commenting the passage, we have just cited he says: “*Notice that craft (techné), inquiry (methodos), action (praxis), and decision (prohairesis) are all rational dispositions and activities. Thus, Aristotle is not suggesting that all of our behaviour, including a person's thoughtless munching of potato chips while he reads, is performed with the conscious intention of becoming some good...*”⁷⁰ ...but, we paraphrase, only that which involves a thought-through end.

Aristotle begins (Book One, chapter one) by establishing that finality governs all kinds of things we do deliberately, rationally, be it things where the end is a work which lies beyond the action and knowledge that produced it, or things where the action and its end are one and the same. He also uses the phrase “*worthy of choice*” when it comes to ends desired for themselves and not with a view to another end. In chapter two he points to the effect upon one's life of being “*aware*” of that end which we would choose beyond all others. This awareness would make us “*more apt to hit upon what is needed*”⁷¹, or what is necessary for that end. This requires “*getting a grasp*” of what this end might be and to what kind of knowledge or capacity it belongs. Answering this question at the end of chapter two, Aristotle says that the identifying of an end belongs to the kind of knowledge and capacity proper to the political realm. He is quite specific about what he means by “*the political*” (*he politike*, the substantive adjective): the “*knowledge or capacity which is most governing and most a master art*”. The political capacity is such, because it:

*“prescribes which kinds of knowledge ought to be in the cities, and what sorts each person ought to learn and to what extent.”*⁷²

The end of this capacity is to ensure that other activities attain their end.

⁶⁹ *NE* 1094a 1-3

⁷⁰ G. Richardson Lear (2009), *Happiness and the structure of ends*, in G. Anagnostopoulos, ed., *A companion to Aristotle*, (2009), Wiley Blackwell.

⁷¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a 25, Aristotle, J. Sachs (tr.) (2002) Focus.

⁷² *Idem*, 1094b, 1-10.

“Since this capacity makes use of the rest of the kinds of knowledge, and also lays down the law about what one ought to do and from what one ought to refrain, the end of this capacity should include the ends of other pursuits, so that this end would be the human good.”⁷³

So, Aristotle is asking himself about the kind of *knowledge* the possession of which one’s most desired good belongs to. And he extends the domain of this inquiry to the city, since our lives clearly mingle with those of each other, making this kind of knowledge necessarily of a political, or communitarian nature as well as of an individual. His question seems clear. We are not considering the domain of knowledge structured and defined by the physical, as he does in philosophy of nature. Nor are we considering first things at the level of that-which-is, as he does in first philosophy. We are in the domain of *actions*, great and small, and trying to find out how one can think these actions through. Where does one begin from, and how does one progress, in finding what exactly it is that one most desires, what one needs in order to attain it and act towards it, at an individual level and at the level of the city?

III.3. Deliberation on particulars

Aristotle points out that when seeing the kind of ways of thinking proper to a specific type of thing, one must also adapt one’s expectations of precision to the nature of the topic at hand.

“It belongs to an educated person to look for just so much precision in each kind of discourse as the nature of the thing one is concerned with admits”⁷⁴.

In the case of actions, one should not expect it to be possible to say that a specific action will always be good. About things that are beautiful, just or good there is a deal of inconsistency. This initial investigation by Aristotle into how we can best think through human action begins therefore to arrive at a kind of thinking which will involve distinguishing cases carefully, rather than finding a rule of nature about specific actions. Experience of *particulars* is required.

“All people are good at making distinctions about the things they are acquainted with, and each is a good judge of those things”⁷⁵.

Experience is required in order to become familiar with the things one needs to make subtle distinctions about. A young person will not yet have sufficient experience to be able to master the kind of knowledge necessary for the political. They are *“inexperienced in the actions of life”*.⁷⁶ Young people also lack a certain inclination towards not simply following their impulses; *“their end is not knowing but action”*.⁷⁷ In this matter youth and immaturity, regardless of age, are the same thing.

“To those who keep their desires in proportion (kata logon – in accord with reason) and act in that way, knowing about these things would be of great benefit”⁷⁸.

Aristotle observes that all kinds of knowledge and choices aim at something good. It is perhaps important to note here that Aristotle here (in I 4) is not yet using the term “good” in a strictly moral sense but in more of a natural sense, i.e. to designate that which something or someone is drawn to.

⁷³ Idem, 1094b 5

⁷⁴ Idem, 1094b 22

⁷⁵ Idem, 1094b 26

⁷⁶ Idem, 1095a 5

⁷⁷ Idem, 1095a 6

⁷⁸ Idem, 1095a 10

There has been on his part no other attempt to define the good than as that which one wants, desires, loves to attain, obtain or live towards. In more modern ways of thinking one would object that not everything that one is drawn towards is actually beneficial or good. Aristotle will get to this later, observing that it is possible, and even easy, for one to be mistaken about the location or identity of the good one desires, i.e. in his distinction – which, as we shall see, constitutes a central activity of the practical intelligence – between the real and the apparent good. This moment in the life of the practical intelligence will be of key importance when we identify the core difference between Aristotle and Kant, and the reasons behind their very divergent conclusions about practical intelligence.

Pursuing his investigation into the most developed form of practical thinking – that of the political, which takes into account the search by multiple individuals for their good, and requires an understanding of what *type* of thing those goods can be – Aristotle looks next for “*what it is that we can claim the political aims at, and what, of all the goods aimed at by action, is the highest*”.⁷⁹

III.4. Our knowledge of what we call good

Aristotle offers (in I 6) an inquiry of considerable importance not only for what is to follow in his own ethical construction but also for what was to come later with Kant, among others. This is a reflection and analysis of the nature of our knowledge of what we call “good”. Addressing his teacher Plato’s theory of ideal forms, Aristotle explains his departure from this theory by discussing the way in which ‘good’ may or may not be commensurable with being. As we know, according to Plato only Forms *are* and, as Aristotle points out, “*those who brought in this opinion did not make forms within which a primary and a derivative instance were spoken of...*”.⁸⁰ Aristotle points out that when we use the word “good” we do not only use it for that-which-is in a simple sense, i.e. for the *ousia* of something, but also for all kinds of attributes which are, in their being, dependent upon something else. Therefore, there is no one way of using the term “good”; its formal meaning cannot be reduced to one type of thing, and thus universalised. If we are to begin with the experience we have of things, the term “good” cannot be reduced to one particular form. It is analogically attributed to things, substantial and accidental alike. Aristotle further argues that “good” can also not be limited to one kind of *knowledge*, since the different things or activities it is applied to are “good” as a result of ‘knowledges’ which have nothing in common, for example, the art of war and the art of medicine.

“*Since good is meant in just as many ways as being is [here Aristotle lists 6 of the 8 or 10 categories – ways in which being is attributed to something – that he develops in his *Metaphysics*], it is clear that there could not be any common good that is one and universal, for if there were, it could not have been meant in all the ways of attributing being but only in one*”.

And;

*Further, since, of the things that come under one form, there is also one kind of knowledge, there would also be some one kind of knowledge of all things that are good; but as it is there are many, even of the good things that come under one way of attributing being...*⁸¹

The *ideal* part of the ideal forms, the particular form *in itself* is, argues Aristotle, surely no different to the particular example of that form in any individual thing.

⁷⁹ Idem, 1095a 15

⁸⁰ Idem, 1096a 18

⁸¹ Idem, 1096a 24-29

*“Surely it [any given particular thing we call “good”] will not be any more good by being everlasting, in as much as a long lasting thing is no more white than one that lasts only a day”.*⁸²

Taking the inquiry further, Aristotle asks whether – since he is considering a certain group of good things, namely those that are considered ultimate and sought after in their own right – these goods belong to one form or not. He has established that good things can be classified as good in themselves or good as in derived-as-being-good by virtue of their relation to something that is good in itself. He finally puts to rest the platonic claim that there is a one, ideal form of good (I 6): there are some things we value as good in themselves since we value them even when we don’t use them, such as having good sense, etc. Yet since these good things are different, they cannot be conflated on the basis of their goodness. There is therefore no one ideal goodness *“that is shared and comes under one form”*. ‘Good’ could still be attributed to different things by chance – in the way both a tree and a dog have a bark – or by way of derivation – as when we say that a knife and a human being are medical – or when applied to different parts of a whole. In so far as Aristotle pushes through here to an answer about what we mean by good, he seems to emphasise that the only option that holds water is analogy, where the *relation* of one thing to a certain other – a good – remains.

III.5. The good as final cause

Returning to an earlier observation, Aristotle answers his question of what the good is by describing it as that-for-the-sake-of-which one does something. With regard to *action* – as distinct from work or ‘artistic’ projects (*tekhne*), where the result produced is that for the sake of which they are done – the end, *telos*, is its *hou heneka*. As J. Sachs reminds us,⁸³ Aristotle often uses the word *telos* in its adjective form, *teleion* when referring to the *hou heneka*, that-for-the-sake-of-which one does something.

*“Since the ends [telos] seem to be more than one, while we choose some of them on account of something else, such as wealth, flutes, and instrumental things generally, it is clear that they are not all complete [teleion], but it is manifest that the highest good is something complete [teleion]”.*⁸⁴

In other words, the ends of our actions, though ends, are not always fully in possession of the quality of being an end, or, they are not ultimate ends. The complete good would seem to be happiness, and happiness would seem therefore to be an end which is not at the same time a means, and which is self-sufficient.

What follows this in *NE* will prove of great importance to our comparison with Kant. Asking what happiness might be, Aristotle goes in search of what it would mean for a human being to be *in act*, or rather, what kind of action would be most properly human for humans *as humans*.

*“For just as with a flute player or sculptor or any artisan, and generally with those to whom some work or action belongs, the good and the doing it will seem to be in the action, so too it would seem to be the case with a human being, if indeed there is some [act] that belongs to one”.*⁸⁵

And;

“...what remains is some sort of life that puts into [act] that in us which has articulate speech; of this capacity, one aspect is what is able to be persuaded by reason, while the other is what has reason and thinks things through. And

⁸² Idem, 1096b 5

⁸³ In the commentary to his translation, at p. 9

⁸⁴ Idem, 1097a25, p. 9 in the J. Sachs edition mentioned.

⁸⁵ Idem, 1097b 25.

*since this is still meant in two ways, one must set it down as a life in a state of [act], since this seems to be the more governing meaning”.*⁸⁶

III.6. Acting seriously means choosing

In the present context, Aristotle brings together several important threads of his reflection so far, and which will be defining lines of thought throughout *NE*: the reasonable nature of human action, the fact that its action would have to be a deliberate way of life if it were to become a state of existence for a living being, i.e. one which thinks and chooses and acts, and the observation of seriousness and virtue as key elements to properly human action. Being serious (*spoudaios*) is a question of excellence in one's actions, for example when one plays the harp *well*. Why does Aristotle not simply use the word “excellence”? It is because there is more to being serious than excellence in ability to act well. Seriousness has to do with the action itself. This action, as Aristotle has established, has to do with reason. Just as a harpist's action occurs when he plays the harp well, and not in simply being *able* to play the harp well, and as this requires choice of action, so by analogy can we say that a human being's act:

*“consists of act of the soul and actions that go along with reason, and it belongs to a man of serious stature to do these things well and beautifully, while each thing is accomplished well as a result of the virtue appropriate to it...”*⁸⁷

As a harpist requires the skill of playing in order to, at the appropriate time and place, play the harp well, so by analogy does a human being require virtues in order to be able to act well, i.e. in a way that is excellent and beautiful in terms of reason. Seriousness, being *spoudaios*, comes a pair with the introduction of reason into Aristotle's account of human action. Properly human action will not only be of a reasonable nature, but it will also occur under the guidance of reason, since with a living being excellence in action and act are simultaneous.

This, as we shall see further on, is what leads Aristotle to see virtue as the way of life which is most human, or in other words, to see human action as having to do with virtue as central to the being-in-act of a rational animal. Reason actively present in acquired habits of ‘end-ed’ (*teleion*) behaviour.

III.7. Two further aspects of virtue of character as involving thought

In I 8 Aristotle underlines two differences between virtue as he has just sketched it and the virtue of the Cynics before him. First, the virtue he speaks of is a part of the being-in-act of a human, i.e. the active life of a rational animal. It has therefore more to do with usage of virtue in actions than with possessing and maintaining a condition of character or behaviour. Secondly, passions and the soul belong together, and in the same way that a particular knowledge or skill to which one is passionately devoted is pleasant, so are acts of virtue also pleasant to the one who is passionately devoted to the virtuous life. Aristotle concludes by observing that a part of us is without reason yet shares in reason – as the passions of the virtuous demonstrate –, and a part of us that is without reason struggles against reason, going often in precisely the opposite direction to virtue. While the vegetative, instinctive life has no reason in itself the “*desiring and generally appetitive part*” shares in reason in so far as it “*listens to and obeys reason*”.⁸⁸

“...having reason will also be twofold, name having it in the governing sense or in the sense of something that can listen to a father. And virtue as well is divided in accordance with the same distinction, for we speak of virtues as pertaining

⁸⁶ Idem, 1098a 5-8

⁸⁷ Idem, 1098a 15

⁸⁸ Idem, 1102b 30

either to thinking or to character, and speak of wisdom, astuteness, and practical judgement as intellectual virtues, and generosity and temperance as virtues of character”⁸⁹

The centrality of thinking in Aristotle’s moral virtue can also be seen in his concept of the latter as relying upon the finding of the mean.

III.8. Virtue of character: a mean condition established by insight and choice

Having established that human happiness has to do with a being-in-act requiring virtue as actions inhabited by reason, Aristotle sets out to explore what this kind of virtue is in more detail. This takes him from Book 2 through to 6 and integrates large portions on the centrality of choosing, *proairesis*. It ends up, in chapter 6, at his investigation into *phronesis*, practical reasoning. Let us continue to identify the emergence of practical reasoning in Aristotle’s development of virtue in Books 2 to 5.

The passage from *ethos* to *êthos*, from habit to character, is to some extent the best overview one could get of Aristotle’s analysis of virtue. How one develops character – meant as an acquired, stable, though active condition of inclination disposed towards reasonable actions – is complex. Before arriving at a formulation of what practical reason is (Books 5 and 6), Aristotle considers the particular of acting, i.e. the particular virtues.

“Now the phrase ‘acting in accordance with right reason’ is commonly accepted, and let it be set down – there will be a discussion of it later, both what right reason is and how it is related to other virtues. But let this be acknowledged in advance – that every discourse that concerns actions is obliged to speak in outline and not precisely... [since] matters that are involved in actions and are advantageous have nothing rigidly fixed about them... And since the general discourse is of this sort, still more does the discourse that concerns particulars lack precision, for... it is always necessary for those who are acting to look at the circumstances surrounding the occasion themselves...”⁹⁰

III.9. Virtue as seeing and choosing the mean

Practical judgement is not something that has to do with fixed measures or specific actions since *“matters that are involved in actions and are advantageous have nothing rigidly fixed about them”*, and they involve circumstances which must necessarily be taken into account since they play a role in the action. Aristotle will therefore proceed to examine virtues starting from the most extreme boundaries and working his way in, so to narrow his definition down to the most precise terms possible for a domain which concerns actions which cannot be materially determined. The extremes are the possibilities of physical destruction in human action. Excess and deficiency of activities which are healthy when in a quantity somewhere in between, result in the destruction of a part of the agent. On the contrary, a proportionate amount of the same action produces beneficial results for the agent. This is true of all physical activities. Too little exercise and one falls into ill health. Too much exercise and one damages one’s body. Yet with an amount somewhere in between one thrives and even grows in strength. Similar things can be observed with food and drink, and indeed all other passionate movements: between cowardice and rashness lies beneficial courage; between gluttony and disinterest lies temperance.

“The sort of virtue that belongs to character (êthos) is concerned with pleasures and pains, since it is on account of pleasure that we perform base actions, and on account of pain that we refrain from beautiful actions. Hence it is necessary to be brought up in some way straight from childhood, as Plato says, so as to take delight and feel pain in those things in which one ought, for this is the right education.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Idem, 1103a 1-5

⁹⁰ Idem, 1103b 35 – 1104a 9

⁹¹ Idem, 1104b 9-13

As J. Sachs points out in his translation of this passage, Aristotle is referring to Plato's *Republic* where Socrates says that the reason for censorship of what children see or hear in stories or music is not firstly because of the danger that they might imitate depraved behaviour but because it would coarsen their sensibilities and handicap the development of their capacity to make choices. Aristotle points out clearly the link between the acquisition of virtue and the capacity to make choices. Virtue makes choice-making possible in a fundamental, basic sense of choice-making which is that gut orientation we have for things. It is easier to opt, or choose for things advantageous to our human life if we have developed our passions in a particular way: that of becoming an active condition, or *hexis*, favourable to engaging with the most human good. The point Aristotle is making in book two is that there are virtuous actions but this does not mean one has acquired virtue. Virtue, since it is a mean and not a specific, fixed set of particular actions, is more a question of a state than of a set of rules. He is also emphasising that this state of virtue is developed, or shaped out of the passions themselves. It is a certain way of living one's passions, such that they favour the rest of one's human life. The deliberate, *knowing*, and chosen repetition of virtuous actions produces a stable condition which can resist pressure to act otherwise. This is the meaning of his words *ametakinetos* in chapter four. Virtue occurs in us only if one does virtuous actions

*"first of all, knowingly, and next, having chosen them, and chosen them for their own sake, and third, being in a stable condition and not-able-to-be-moved-all-the-way-out-of-it [ametakinetos]."*⁹²

As Philipp Brüllmann writes, Aristotle "...claims that in order to count as virtuous, an action must be done from a certain disposition: the agent must act knowingly, she must choose the action for its own sake and she must act from a character that is firm and unshakable (bebaios kai ametakinteos)."⁹³

Aristotle is quick to qualify that this *stable* condition is also an *active* one. To this purport, he discusses (in I 5) three things which come to be present in the soul, or in other words, three things which the soul has, in one way or another: feelings (*pathe*), capacities (*dunameis*), and active conditions (*hexeis*). This is a sweeping reference to the *De Anima*, where Aristotle considers these things in themselves, whereas in *NE* he is looking at them in so far as they are a part of action. *Pathe*, feelings, or passions, refers to the different ways in which we undergo things, or are moved. *Dunamis* refers to that in us which in itself has the inbuilt capacity for, and natural tendency towards being something in particular but which is not yet that thing. Then, says Aristotle, come our active conditions, or *hexeis*. This refers, in the words of Sachs, to "*any way in which one deliberately holds oneself in relation to (in this case) feelings and desires, once it becomes a constant part of oneself*".⁹⁴ The whole collection of one's active conditions has the name of *ethos*, or character; the general form of our sensibility and way of relating to things, situations, people, etc. Active conditions can be good or bad, which means that one can deliberately hold oneself in relation to feelings and desires in a way which is advantageous to the human good or not. For example, with anger; reacting violently or slackly are two extremes to which our predispositions can tend; the dominance of violence or of harmony. Virtue comes into play at precisely this point, says Aristotle.

*"We are angry and frightened without choice, but the virtues are certain kinds of choices [aretai proairesis tines] or not present without choice. And on top of these things, as a result of the feelings we are said to be moved, but as a result of the virtues and vices we are said not to be moved but to be disposed [diakleisthai] in a certain way"*⁹⁵

Virtue is therefore not simply a certain type of action, nor simply a certain choice, though it entails both of these. It is what happens when those chosen actions also bring about a certain disposition to act in those ways. Virtue is therefore not a *pre*-disposition one could be born with, or could acquire without

⁹² Idem, 1105a 32

⁹³ P. Brüllmann (2019), *The Stoics*, in T. Angier, ed., *Natural Law Ethics*, (2019) Cambridge University Press.

⁹⁴ Op. Cit., p. 201

⁹⁵ Op. Cit., 1106a 1

noticing from the environment one grew up in. It is not a *dunamis*, a natural, in-born tendency or inclination. It is a disposition deliberately acquired.

*“What remains is that the [virtues] are active conditions [hexeis]”*⁹⁶ In other words, dispositions involving choice. The term “choice”, *proairesis*, is one which is therefore central to virtue in general. It is a word in Greek which at least comes close to meaning the deliberate having of preference, electing one thing above another as that which is better. What kind of object does this kind of choice concern if it is, in general terms, able to result in a stable though active condition and in a character favourable to ultimate goods?

*“The virtue of a human being would be the active condition from which one becomes a good human being and from which one will yield up one’s work well”*⁹⁷

A virtue is not only that which makes excellent the capacity concerned by it, but which also makes that capacity fully itself and active, fruitful and productive. Calculating where exactly the best action lies requires knowledge of things our actions are concerned with, but also knowledge of ourselves.

*“Everyone who has knowledge avoids excess and deficiency, but seeks the mean and chooses this, but not the mean that belongs to the thing but the mean in relation to us”*⁹⁸

*“To feel them [feelings] when one ought, and in the cases in which, and toward the people whom, for the reason for the sake of which, and in the manner one ought, is both a mean and the best thing, which is what belongs to virtue”*⁹⁹

Thus, Aristotle arrives at a definition of virtue as:

*“an active condition that makes one apt at choosing, consisting of a mean condition to us, which is determined by a proportion and by means by which a person with practical judgement [phronimos] would determine it.”*¹⁰⁰

*“Virtue both discovers and chooses the mean.”*¹⁰¹

III.10. Deliberating and choosing

Having discussed what virtue is, and in particular that it involves chosen, deliberated actions producing character, Aristotle considers this kind of action from the point of view of the one who performs it (Book III). It being necessarily willing would seem to be obvious and so one can drop actions which are unwilling (forced or done through ignorance or under duress) as irrelevant to the question of vice and virtue. But willing actions seem to be choices involving reasonable deliberation. A choice is neither a simple *desire* nor an *opinion* about what *should* happen, but it is rather something *willing*. Yet willing is too broad a definition for choice, since one does not choose to do all that one wants to do.

*“But might it just be one [something willed] that has been deliberated about first [probebouleumenon]? For choice [proairesis] is involved with reason [logos] and thinking things through [dianoias].”*¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Idem, 1106a 12

⁹⁷ Idem, 1106a 22

⁹⁸ Idem, 1106b 5

⁹⁹ Idem, 1106b 21

¹⁰⁰ Idem, 1107a 1

¹⁰¹ Idem, 1107a 6

¹⁰² Idem, 1112a 5

On this unavoidable involvement of deliberation in Aristotle's concept of choice, Robert Heinaman comments: "*Choice occurs only when the action is immediately preceded by deliberation aiming at realizing a wished-for goal. So, actions done without deliberation, such as those done on the spur of the moment (NE III.2, 1111b 9-10), are not chosen, though they can still express a mature adult's virtue or virtue (III.8, 1117a 17-22).*"¹⁰³

As Sachs points out¹⁰⁴, the word *proairesis*, which Aristotle says seems to imply forethought, is composed of *pro* and *airesis*. The latter component means simply to select something out of an array of things. To do so could happen for many reasons and not deliberately, but Aristotle indicates that to do so before the actual taking of the thing, *pro-airesis*, is exactly what choice is; to take, or select in one's mind, one thing from among an array of things, with a view to actually selecting the thing itself. The word he uses to describe the thinking through of things (*dianoias*), that distinguishes choosing (*proairesis*) from simply wanting (*poion*) is *probouleumenon*, commonly translated as deliberation. The word literally means the making of a plan in advance. Aristotle says in the passage cited above that it is a kind of *dianoias*, i.e. of thinking things through. Considering, or thinking things through, in the way one would when considering how one would actually go about doing the action in question. This element or involvement of reasoning is what is proper to choosing and distinguishes it from willing, which in turn has already been distinguished from desiring. Heinaman points out that for Aristotle the act of choosing is, due to the deliberation involved and which concerns the end one intends the action for, more revealing of one's character than the particular action it leads to.

*"Since action may go wrong and fail to reveal the agent's goals, choice is a better indication of character than action because it reveals the agent's ends, the goods he wishes for and the bases of those ends: his beliefs about what is valuable."*¹⁰⁵

In this way Aristotle arrives at a consideration which is of particular importance in our inquiry. Asking what kinds of things can be deliberated about, he observes:

*"We deliberate about things that are up to us and are matters of action, and these the ones that are left. For the causes responsible for things seem to be nature, necessity, and chance, and also intelligence and everything that is due to human beings. And among human beings, each sort deliberates about the things to be done by its own acts."*¹⁰⁶

Deliberation is a distinguishing characteristic of choice. When one chooses something, one is not merely thinking about what that action is, nor is one only wanting to accomplish it. One is thinking with a view to acting. The word itself for deliberation in Greek is *probouleumenon*. *Boule* means wish, decision or counsel, deriving from *Boulomai*, to wish or want. R. Beekes¹⁰⁷ discusses these verbs and their relationship in his *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. One possible explanation for the presence of *boulema* within *probouleumenon*, deliberation, is that *boulemai* also gave *boule*, a counsel of people giving decrees according to what they discussed, advised, weighed up and then willed to happen in the city. A will or a wish would therefore be practically synonymous with careful consideration with a view to action, and could easily be recapitulated in thinking-with-a-view-to-wanting something to take place. This would seem to be supported by Beekes' entry for *boulemai*; to will, wish or to *be willing*. Further on, Aristotle notes that one deliberates not about certain things, but about things which, though they happen generally in a particular way, still leave some uncertainty in how they will turn out when we actually do them, given all the variable factors they involve. Medical procedures and maritime navigation can be planned and

¹⁰³ Heinaman, R. (2009) "Voluntary, Involuntary, and Choice." In Anagnostopoulos, G. red. (2009) *A Companion to Aristotle*, p.487-488. Blackwell.

¹⁰⁴ Op. Cit., p.41

¹⁰⁵ Op. Cit., p. 487

¹⁰⁶ Op. Cit., 1112a 32

¹⁰⁷ R. Beekes (2009), *Etymological Dictionary of Greek, volume 1*, Brill, p. 231

predicted to a certain level of precision and no further; the rest is a question of how it will turn out in the circumstances of a particular operation or voyage. And so, Aristotle observes:

“We do not deliberate about ends but about the things that are related to the ends”.¹⁰⁸

“...nor does anyone else deliberate about ends, but having set down the end, they consider in what way and by what means it would be the case”.¹⁰⁹

The importance of deliberation as *analysis* rather than as *synthesis* is something Aristotle emphasises here. Thinking-with-a-view-wanting refers here to seeking that which one will want *if it meets a certain criterion*, that of being the best way to reach the end. It is therefore not what one does with regards to the end itself. Analysis – being an inquiry which starts with the end and seeks to identify that which leads towards it – is the way of thinking most fitting to deliberation with regard to an action, since action takes its *raison d’être* from the end desired. Synthesis – the inquiry starting from an admitted given and working towards what that given logically leads to – is not an inquiry which takes the end as starting point for action. Instead it is the arriving at a conclusion resulting from the given actions or circumstances which have therefore a determining role in the outcome. That which results from the synthesis takes the place of the end in analysis. Deliberation is thus a kind of analysis since we mean the kind of thinking we could describe as evaluating-with-a-view-to-action. In other words, it is about finding out which means are most suitable to the end wanted clearly in its own right, given that the way to reach the end involves a degree of variables in the particular set of circumstances involved. Unlike in art (*tekne*) or in any kind of work or productivity, the means in human *action* (*praxis*) cannot be whittled down to set, determined best steps to be taken since the end desired is not a sensible end-result, the ways to engage with it cannot be narrowed down to specific, necessary sensible moves. If the end is human, and therefore, in what is proper to it, not material, then the means to engage with it will be adapted accordingly. The best way to speak to one’s friend will not only depend upon the content of one’s message but also upon the time and place, and upon the state of one’s friend’s mind.

“Choice would be the deliberate [bouleutike] desire of things that are up to us, for having decided as a result of deliberating, we desire in accordance with our deliberation”.¹¹⁰

As J. Sachs notes:

*“This discussion of moral responsibility has shown it to be dependent on a certain kind of thinking, so choice will be addressed again in connection with the intellectual virtues at 1139a 31 – b 5. The direction of the inquiry here emphasises a refinement of desire as it is transformed into choice by the thinking involved in deliberation; there a mirror image of the same conclusion will show that the rationality characteristic of human beings is fused with desire. This has been called the central teaching of Aristotle’s ethics.”*¹¹¹

So much can be said for the central role that choice plays in Aristotle’s finality-centred, means-seeking ethics, and for the key moment of deliberation in choice. Deliberation is thinking with a view to acting with a view to obtaining what one desires. This particular kind of thinking will be made clearer when we return to it with Book 6 of the *NE*. Excellence in acting requires a certain kind of excellence in thinking.

¹⁰⁸ Op. Cit., 1112b 12

¹⁰⁹ Idem, 1112b 15

¹¹⁰ Idem, 1113a 10

¹¹¹ Op.Cit., p.43

III.11. Distinguishing the real good from the apparent good

Before Aristotle embarks upon a treatise of the central virtues of character individually, he addresses one more point of crucial importance to the question of what he sees practical intelligence to be. It is the well-known passage on the real and the apparent good. Aristotle picks up on the paradox underlined by Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias*: the commonly experienced situation of wishing for something one does not actually wish for, a situation which comes about when one mistakes a thing for something it is not. The reasoning in this dense passage is as follows. Since we have said that what one wishes for or desires is by the same token an end, we must also admit that some would say this end is a good and others that it merely appears to be good to the one desiring it. Yet if it were a good then we have a problem since some people desire things which, when they have them, they then realise to be not good at all. And in turn, if we say that desire bears upon the apparent good alone then we arrive at contradiction about the nature of things as far as goodness is concerned since different people award the term "good" to different and opposing things. Aristotle then suggests that one distinguish between what is desired simply (the good) and what is desired by individual people, and that this can vary according to that upon which one brings one's attention and desire to bear. He argues that there is a correspondence between the desires of a virtuous person and a good thing that is actually good, and likewise between the morally out of shape person and things which are not good. The genuinely good thing appears good to the virtuous person, and the superficially pleasing but actually bad thing appears good to the vicious person.

*"For the person of serious moral stature discerns things correctly, and in each kind of thing, the true instance shows itself to such a person. For in accordance with each sort of active condition there are special things that are beautiful and pleasant, and the person of serious moral stature is distinguished most of all, perhaps, for seeing what is truly so in each kind"*¹¹²

Aristotle thus points out that although it would seem true that everyone sees an end in the *apparently* good thing they desire, that which appears good varies not just according to different tastes in pleasure but also according to the moral stature of the desiring individual. In other words, he is arguing again for the malleability of the passions, and for the possibility of the intelligence to play a determining role for them. Virtues alter what one desires and Aristotle says here that what one *sees* in an object lies at the heart of this. The intelligence plays a guiding role and appetite adjusts. Those who end up wishing for things they later realise are not what they most deeply desired are those who allow pleasure and pain to dictate their opinion and choice of what is actually good or bad.

*"Then to the person of serious moral stature, what is wished for would be what is truly good, but to a flighty sort of person it would be any random thing, just as, in the case of bodies, for the ones that are in good condition those things are healthy that are truly so, while for the ones that are sickly different things might be healthy... For the person of serious moral stature discerns each thin correctly, and in each kind of thing the true instance shows itself correctly to such a person."*¹¹³

The interdependence of moral virtue and intellect is clear to see here. How is it possible for someone to see something as good when in fact it is something else?

*"In most people, a distortion seems to come about by the action of pleasure, since it appears good when it is not."*¹¹⁴

So, the intelligence in the act of discernment (*krinei*) is essential to the virtuous acts which bear upon human goods and produce serious moral stature where bad things no longer appear good or attractive.

¹¹² Op. Cit., 1113 c.30-35

¹¹³ Idem, 1113a 25-30

¹¹⁴ Idem, 1113b 1

Without this discernment and ensuing character things pleasing to the passions will be taken to be good for a person.

Finally, before beginning to look at the virtues, Aristotle discusses a point which will set him apart from Kant; who exactly is the author of our actions, we or the writer of an innate moral code?

In chapter 5 of Book 3 the philosopher points to the fact that if ethical decision making is analytical – i.e. that it begins from the end wished for and seeks the means which are deliberated about and chosen with regard to this end – the ensuing acts are willed and chosen. Virtue ensues from these kinds of acts and so virtue too is up to us, as is vice, the deliberate omission of a virtuous act.

“If these things seem correct and we are not able to trace our actions back to any other sources besides those that are in us, then those things of which the sources are in us are also up to us and willing acts.”¹¹⁵

Discussing responsibility for one’s actions – and therefore also, in accordance with what he has just said, for one’s active condition, or virtue – Aristotle asks whether it is possible for one to not be *able* to make correct choices through not being able to see beyond the apparent good. Clearly, since seeing things as they really are is something that goes along with virtue of character, one is therefore responsible not only for one’s actions, but also for the condition of virtue or vice they develop, *and* for the clarity of sight one has as a result; sight unclouded by passions for secondary elements of an object, or sight which, under the pressure of the passions, bears not upon its proper object but upon the proper object of the passions, namely some secondary aspect of the thing desired.

“And this is clear from the kinds of training there are for any sort of competition or performance, for people perfect themselves by being in act. So, in order to be unaware that it is from one’s being in act involved in each way of acting that one’s active conditions come about, one would have to be completely unconscious.”¹¹⁶

“So, if each were in some way responsible for one’s own active conditions, then each would be in some way responsible oneself for how things appear...”¹¹⁷

Aristotle then goes on to explore, and even briefly argue for, the alternative idea that if one were not responsible for how things appear but only for one’s virtue, there would have to be some innate moral vision or understanding. In 1103a 23-26 he had affirmed that habit requires a pre-existing natural capacity. Here he is arguing briefly from another standpoint, as if there were more than a natural capacity but also an actual innate understanding of right and wrong. However, as develops in the ensuing counter argument, this would mean that those who see clearly what is actually good and right have to be born with more of this vision than those who are convinced something bad is good for them. This would then mean that virtue and vice are equally willing since one has cut out choice and willingness from the end. One simply acts in accordance with what naturally seems good or bad. The point here seems to be that if one removes the intellectual virtue of being able to discern what is truly good from that which is simply pleasing to the passions, one also reduces virtue and vice to obedience to what one naturally sees and understands to be good or bad. When one *is* responsible (i.e. capable) of discerning what is really good from what is merely pleasing, this means that with the person of serious moral stature there is more willingness and choice present than with the vicious person, who is lacking the exercise of his capacity to discern the truly good from the merely pleasing, and allowing his judgement of good and bad to be dictated by his passions. If therefore we are going to say that virtues are willing, we need then to also say that they are not developed solely because of, or only in obedience to a natural inclination or determining

¹¹⁵ Idem, 1113b 20

¹¹⁶ Idem, 1114a 10

¹¹⁷ Idem, 1114b 1

disposition or in-built moral law, but thanks to the acquisition of practical reasoning. This concludes Aristotle's investigation into virtue in general:

*"...that they [the virtues] are mean conditions and that they are active conditions, and that on account of themselves they make one apt to do those things by which they come about, and that they are up to us and willing things, and that they make one do things in the way that right reason would dictate"*¹¹⁸

III.12. The intellectual virtue of *phronesis*

In Book 6 Aristotle picks up this thread of what "right reason" is. Having looked at the specific virtues of courage, temperance and justice, he notes that if virtue occurs as a mean condition between excess and deficiency, this implies that there be a point at which one passes into or out of excess or deficiency. Mean amounts require therefore judgement of what he has until now simply termed "right reason", i.e. judgement concerning the correct amount, or where, for example, the healthy amount of wine to drink in one evening lies. This healthy amount is to be judged by means of that which is most favourable to one's most human end, taking into account the limiting or advantageous circumstances one is in. But one must of course look more closely at how one makes such judgements.

*"Hence it is necessary in connection with active conditions of the soul as well, not only that this be said truly, but also that it be determined what right understanding is and what defines it."*¹¹⁹

As already established in Book 2, the mean condition the constant choosing of which constitutes the acquired condition we call virtue, is one which requires to be found through deliberation and chosen each time anew since action takes place in constantly fluctuating circumstances. As established in Book 3, the seeing of, and possibility to discern, what is really good and advantageous is itself also a discernment between what a given good *actually* is and how it merely *appears* to be and appeals to our passions. Furthermore, these two types of active condition – of an appetite or desire accustomed to what is good for the whole human being, and of an intellect active in the situations where action takes place, seeing what the object of attraction or repulsion actually is – are mutually dependant.

Here Aristotle draws upon distinctions made in the *De Anima*¹²⁰ and mentioned earlier in *NE*¹²¹. The human living being has different parts, or capacities, of rational and irrational nature. Action, i.e. deliberate and chosen movement with a view to an end and where the end is in the acting, is characterised by the rational, but by one of two parts of the rational, the other being the capacity we have to learn and know things without a view to an end in action. While the knowing of the things that do not change (or knowing without a view to changing them) pertains to truth and falsity, thinking with a view to action involves end and therefore desire.

*"...what affirming and denying are in thinking, pursuing and avoiding are in desiring, so that, since virtue of character is an active condition of the soul that determines choice, while choice is deliberate desire, for these reasons the rational understanding must be true and the desire right of the choice is of serious worth, and what one affirms, the other pursues."*¹²²

"Truth that stands in agreement with right desire"¹²³ is how Aristotle characterises the sort of thinking that action involves and requires. Clear sight of what is actually good to pursue requires that one is not blinded by

¹¹⁸ Idem, 1114b 25-30

¹¹⁹ Idem, 1138b 33-35

¹²⁰ Aristotle, *De Anima* 411a 27 – b 12

¹²¹ Op Cit, 1102a 28-31

¹²² Idem, 1139a 20-25

¹²³ Idem, 1139a 30

unenlightened passions but that, as we have already seen, moral character aids one's judgement of what is actually good. The interdependency of character and thinking is clear.

"The source of action then, is choice – origin of motion rather than the cause for the sake of which it takes place – while the source of choice is desire combined with a rational understanding which is for the sake of something".¹²⁴

"For good action is an end, and desire aims at this. For this reason, choice is either intellect fused with desire or desire fused with thinking, and such a source is a human being."¹²⁵

In other words, though by thinking alone one could identify what is best to do, without having a character that desires it one is not moved to act. On the other hand, desiring good things in general, without thinking about which one is the best end means one will not see what to do. Cleverness will never reach the excellence of practical judgement if coupled with waywardness in one's affections. Noble desires will never reach the excellence of virtue of character if coupled with a foggy mind about what is worth pursuing.

III.13. The interdependency of practical reasoning and virtue of character

Chapters 3 and 4 look at how knowledge and art are also active conditions. Aristotle returns to them later to explore whether or not they are also virtues. In chapter 5 he considers practical reasoning. He clearly attaches it to the activity of discernment – thinking about action with a view to a desired end and to choosing. Since, as already established in the previous chapters, practical judgement is a question of thinking, it is therefore concerned with truth: the finding out of which action corresponds to the known end one desires in harmony with virtue of character. Practical reasoning is not a question of knowledge since it is not to do with thinking about what things necessarily are, nor is it art since it is not about thinking about what something could be changed into. It is concerned with which action would be best for living well, i.e. to act with a view to some human end and also develop active conditions of character which correspond to and facilitate these choices.

"It remains therefore, that it [practical judgement] is a truth-disclosing active condition involving reason that governs action, concerned with what is good and bad for a human being. For the end of making is difference from itself, but the end of action could not be, since acting well is itself the end."¹²⁶

He invokes the example of Pericles – a dominant figure in Athenian politics during the peaceful period between the Persian and the Polyponesian wars – as someone who demonstrated practical reasoning, seeing what was good for himself and for human beings in general. Temperance, he says, also gets its name from what practical judgement is: *sophrosune*, sound-mindedness, or that which keeps thoughtfulness safe. Temperance is with a view to preserving and defending clear sightedness of what is good.

"For the sources of actions are their ends for the sake of which the actions take place, but to someone disabled by pleasure or pain, the source immediately ceases to be apparent, and it does not seem to him that he needs to choose and to do everything for the sake of this end, since vice is destructive of the source."¹²⁷

Aristotle goes on to emphasise that practical judgement is judgement about a truth concerning things that could be otherwise – and specifically about the best action -, and not simply knowledge of what is.

¹²⁴ Idem, 1139a 31-33

¹²⁵ Idem, 1139b 3-5

¹²⁶ Idem, 1140 b 3-5

¹²⁷ Idem, 1140b 17-20

Practical judgement would therefore be the same as opinion were it not for the fact that it is not just about knowledge of what could be otherwise but is a judgement one arrives at thanks to virtues of character. Knowledge concerns universals which one arrives at through reasoning from examples (*epagoge*¹²⁸). Reasoned demonstrations employ the capacity to find what is necessary and universal and this is then what we know about something. Yet this is not a universal one knows in itself but which one sees in particulars. This looking at the particular with perception of the universal is what Aristotle says is proper to the intellect. While practical judgement is a discernment and disclosure of truth with regard to action with a view to and which is the source of action; it involves knowledge of what things are beyond their appearances, as we have seen. It does therefore involve knowledge of universals. Yet it is especially concerned with *particulars* since action is always with regard to particulars and not universals.

III.14. Feeling and *phronesis*

In our examination of the role of thinking in Aristotle's *NE* we have, as so many before us, seen how thinking runs throughout every aspect of action and how *phronesis* implies inter-dependency with virtue of character. Are we now in a position to return to our question of a re-conception for conscience and its missing element of feeling, and to suggest that Aristotle has, in his interdependent intellectual and moral virtues, provided a useful structure to speak of conscience in a more comprehensive as well as (for most of us) more intuitive way than has hitherto been possible with the conceptions emerging from Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and that provided by Kant? Let us pause to consider this active involvement of feeling in moral decision-making. Among others, Rosalinde Hursthouse focusses on this topic: "*As the opening in 3.1 reminds us, our topic is excellence of character or virtue – that is what we are students of – and virtue is concerned with action and feelings... The feelings of pleasure and pain that accompany people's actions should be taken as a sign of their dispositions and, quite generally, virtue is concerned with the feelings.*"¹²⁹

These remarks gain new interest when we consider them with a view to re-examining conscience. Even more so are those made by Arash Abizadeh, commenting on Aristotle's *NE* Book 6: "*...the emotional make-up and character of the person can be said to be something like a repository or memory of the wisdom of past experience (empeiria), which the agent may consult during the course of practical deliberation... Faced with the indeterminacy of abstract logos, not all considerations that are ethically relevant to a particular situation can be gleamed from a set of codified abstract principles... Consulting "how I feel" about taking a course of action may provide me with important insight about its ethical validity if my character and emotions are virtuously formed – insight based on my previous experience that is unavailable in the form of an abstract set of principles codified in logos.*"¹³⁰

Abizadeh goes on to elaborate how Aristotle's virtue-formed character means that not only are feelings present in one's *phronesis*-deliberations but that *phronesis*, given its interconnectedness with virtue-formed character, can be said to have, so to speak, an extension into feeling. In other words, that one's *phronesis*-deliberations can be said to give ear to one's feelings about a particular action, given that feelings are receptive not just to the facts of an event or action but also to past experiences and details which may likewise throw light on the moral value of the action. The feelings of a virtue-shaped character are sensitive, through a recognition of like by like, to the moral value of a singular, particular action, past, present or projected. A full examination of feeling and memory would require more than we can here offer. Suffice it to say that our practical reasoning, as expounded by Aristotle, clearly involves more than just knowledge and intellect and goes hand-in-hand with one's feelings, which are not only formed and informed by reason but also play a role in our intellectual evaluation of the moral value of actions. And

¹²⁸ Idem, 1139b 29-31

¹²⁹ R. Hursthouse, (1984) *Acting and feeling in character: "Nicomachean Ethics" 3.1*, in *Phronesis*, vol. 29, No 3, pp.252-266.

¹³⁰ A. Abizadeh, (2002) *The Passions of the wise: "Phronesis", Rhetoric, and Aristotle's passionate practical deliberation*, in *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol.56, No 2, pp.267-296, December 2002, Philosophy Education Society Inc.

therefore virtue-formed feelings become a valid player in our conception as well as our exercise of conscience. As Abizadeh said, how I feel about actions may provide me with important *ad hoc* insights.

III.15. *Phantasia* in *phronesis*: a basis for moral conscience

One way to explore how *feeling* could provide informal *insight* may be by returning to the topic of the role of *phantasia* – appearance formation – in Aristotle’s ethics. As any Aristotle reader will remember from *De Anima*, *phantasia* is deeply involved in how we think. *Phantasia* also makes important appearances in *NE*.

Above we quoted this passage from the start of Aristotle’s analysis of *phronesis*,¹³¹ where he describes the end as source of action, and vice as meaning that the end is no longer apparent to oneself, with the consequence that the end *as source* ceases to play its role in what we do:

“For the sources of actions are their ends for the sake of which the actions take place, but to someone disabled by pleasure or pain, the source immediately ceases to be apparent, and it does not seem to him that he needs to choose and to do everything for the sake of this end, since vice is destructive of the source.”¹³²

The view on the end is dependent upon moral virtue since in order to see the end clearly one must see past appearances which are nothing but appearances, and one must have developed a sensitivity which does not cleave to things which are merely pleasing to the senses and are no more than this. The apparentness of the end, and the possibility to spot it and choose it – i.e. for *phronesis* to take place – depends upon moral virtue, the development of which represents a certain preparatory work of *phronesis* akin to the acquiring of glasses; the equipment necessary to see clearly enough to choose wisely. What does Aristotle mean when he says that the end is or is not apparent? Why does this apparentness involve moral virtue? And how does *phronesis* connect with a sensibility shaped by moral virtue? What we will aim to show is that Aristotle’s analysis of an interwoven practical reasoning, moral virtue and an apparent end provide the necessary to speak of a moral conscience.

In the above cited passage from *NE*, Aristotle is discussing *phronesis* and he is pointing out that this intellectual virtue – an active condition by which someone discovers the right means to the right end in particular circumstances – involves maintaining one’s perspective on the end in all circumstances, but that there also be a helpful *apparentness*, or unhelpful lack of apparentness, of the end in the sensible objects or situations encountered which therefore involve the passions. We have encountered the idea of the “apparent” already in *NE* when Aristotle distinguishes the apparent from the real good. What he seems to be saying here is that even when in circumstances where the apparent, but not real good is strongly, or impressively present, for the morally virtuous person the fittingness of the sensible object, circumstance or action with his chosen end is what is most *apparent*. Thus, the distinguishing between the real and apparent good is not enough for virtue. The arrival at unity between what is apparent and what is real would mean one is able to practise *phronesis* fully, with ease. What can we understand about this *apparentness*, or sensitivity for what is really good and end-related? In the passage we are referring to in Aristotle, the author says *enthus ou phainetai arche*, the source ceases to be *apparent*. According to M. Nussbaum¹³³ *phantasia* is more related to dealing with appearances of things that only to the producing of images. J. Noel comments¹³⁴ that there are three usages of *phantasia* in Aristotle: passive reception of after-images, the production of mental imagery, and *Kritika*, the drawing of distinctions. We cannot make

¹³¹ *NE*, 1140 b 17-18

¹³² *Idem*, 1140b 17-20

¹³³ *Aristotle’s De Motu Animalium*, M. Nussbaum (1978), Princeton University Press.

¹³⁴ *Phronesis and Phantasia: teaching with wisdom and imagination*, J. Noel, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1999.

this paper into a thorough discussion of Aristotle's *phantasia*, but it is useful to note that, as Noel points out, Nussbaum describes the third sense of *phantasia* as pertaining to how things appear to us: [Aristotle's] "*phantasia is the faculty in virtue of which the animal sees his object as an object of a certain sort*"¹³⁵ As Noel herself develops: "*Thus phantasia goes beyond just the perception of an image, to the interpretive power of the individual to see the object as something.*"¹³⁶ In her study Noel goes on to consider the role *phantasmata* play in *phronesis*, and she quotes the following passage from Dorothea Frede about how *phantasia* is involved firstly in the seeing of one's end within a given practical situation: "*All activities... presuppose that I envisage something a good or bad for me, to be pursued or avoided. The necessary condition of my thinking that something is good or bad, according to Aristotle, is that the soul shall have certain phantasmata* (De Anima 431 a 14-17): *I have to have the image of a future good or bad* (De Anima 433 b 12-28)."¹³⁷

Simply put, in order to assess a concrete situation where practical discernment is required about what is best to do, one uses one's imagination to consider a sensible object *in the light of one's end*. In other words, one looks at a sensible situation for its relation with one's end. If we return to *Nicomachean Ethics* 1140 b, 17-18 it would seem that Aristotle is indicating two kinds of state of *phantasia* when it comes to the moral life; how things appear to a person of moral virtue and how they appear to a person in the grip of vice. *Phantasia* is involved in both; in the first as a representative capacity employed by practical reasoning to judge a given sensible situation in comparison with one's chosen end, and in the second as a simple means to represent a sensible object as such, for its sensible value as object of a particular passion.

Noel points also to Pendlebury and again to Nussbaum with reference to the role *phantasia* plays in *phronesis*' evaluation of possibles. Whether or not some thing or situation is a means to one's end involves representation of past, present and possible future such situations. Noel quotes the following passage from Pendlebury: "*Both emotion and imagination play an essential part in the proper grasp of situations... In the Aristotelian sense, the job of the imagination (phantasia) is to focus on reality, past or present, in all its concrete particulars rather than to create unreality through free-floating fantasy. It is through imagination that we discern an item in the world as something to be sought or shunned (or to be sought and shunned, for different reasons), as something that answers one or more of our practical concerns or interests.*"¹³⁸

A concise summary of the above is to be found in the words of Nussbaum: *Phantasia and perception "seem to do two jobs in connection with action: they present to the animal some object of desire and they present the concrete situation as an example of what is or is not desired."*¹³⁹ And: "*Phantasia, then, is involved in every action; it must 'prepare' the desire... It looks as though its job is to present the perceived or thought object to the creature in such a way that it can be moved to act.*"¹⁴⁰

In a recent collection of essays¹⁴¹ offering material to counterbalance an overly intellectualist interpretation of both *phantasia* and *phronesis*, the editor Jakob Fink focusses his own contribution to the volume on the physiological mechanics underlying *phronesis*. In a chapter entitled *Aristotle on deliberative phantasia and phronesis*, Fink argues for the indispensable role of a non-intellectualised *phantasia* in a non-intellectualised *phronesis*. His account presents deliberative *phantasia* (*boulentiké phantasia*) as the key to understanding both *phantasia* and *phronesis*. We cannot here probe all dimensions of Aristotle's concept of *phantasia*. We will take it to mean appearance-formation implying prior sensitive confrontation with

¹³⁵ *Op. Cit.*, p.225

¹³⁶ *Op. Cit.*, p.281

¹³⁷ *The cognitive role of phantasia in Aristotle*, D. Frede in *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, M. Nussbaum and A. Okseberg Rorky, eds., (1992), Clarendon Press.

¹³⁸ *Practical arguments, rationalization and imagination in teachers' practical reasoning: a critical discussion*, S. Pendlebury, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 25, pp. 145-151.

¹³⁹ *Op. Cit.*, p. 232

¹⁴⁰ *Op. Cit.*, p. 233

¹⁴¹ Jakob Leth Fink (ed.) *Phantasia in Aristotle's Ethics: Reception in the Arabic, Greek, Hebrew and Latin Traditions*, (2019) Bloomsbury.

exterior sensible objects, and allowing for conversion of what is sensed into *phantasmata* – malleable representations of sense-data. The point Fink makes is that *phantasia* makes *phantasmata* and that *phantasmata* affect us; we have feelings of pleasure or pain because of them. He argues that deliberative *phantasia* has been acknowledged as providing a framework for *phronesis* to work with – the retaining and reproducing of memories and impressions which one may use in assessing what to do or what one has done – but that there is another usage of *phantasia* in *phronesis*. Deliberative *phantasia* “...also produces unified phantasmata with more or less attraction. In this way deliberative phantasia seems to facilitate practical thinking with phantasmata that might lead to action depending on which phantasma is more attractive.”¹⁴² He takes the example of bravery, applying it to the passage in *NE* Book 6 we began this section with (*NE* 1140b 17-20). Aristotle’s character formation involves the acquisition of habit through repeated experiences of good actions. Fink takes the involvement of *phantasia* in this passage concerning *phronesis* to mean that the acquisition of virtue – which involves habituation – also involves the formation of a sensibility to particular *phantasmata* as attractive: “The role of deliberative phantasia is to produce one unified phantasma of situations x , y , z , for example, the phantasma of acting bravely being more attractive (pleasurable). This phantasma derives from single experiences of sense-perception, but it is general and has been performed in a process involving reason, because deliberative phantasia involves reason.”

In other words, brave actions also *appear* as both brave and attractive, presenting themselves to the agent in situations where they are relevant. Character formation means that one has *phantasmata* of virtuous actions and recognises them in possible actions. Fink points to other places in *NE* to support his argument that habituation uses *phantasmata*.

*“Perhaps we should start [ethical teaching] from what is better known to us. Therefore, the one who is to listen to noble, just and quite generally political matters in a satisfactory manner must have been brought up in noble habits. For ‘the that’ (to hoti) is a principle and if this appears sufficiently (ei touto phainoito arkountôs), there is no need for ‘the why’ (to dioti). This kind of listener has or will easily grasp the principles.”*¹⁴³

Later, in a passage referred to above, Aristotle notes:

*“Someone might say that everyone aims at the apparent good (to phainomenon agathon), but that they are not in charge of the appearance (phantasia). Instead, the end (telos) appears to each man in accordance with the person he happens to be.”*¹⁴⁴

Commenting on this passage, Fink underlines that Aristotle rejects the supposition here considered, as though we are not in charge of how the good appears to be to us. “There are two crucial points here: a) character implies and, to a certain extent, controls phantasia of moral principles; b) such a phantasia is more stable than the one we find at the beginning of character formation, just because character is more stable than habits.”¹⁴⁵

This would seem to supply an Aristotelian concept of moral conscience with a second leg to stand on, beside that of a virtue-formed character which provides one with a virtue-formed feeling for what is good or bad. A virtue-formed character involves the *phantasia*, providing practical reason with past experiences. A *phantasia* which is developed and trained – in tandem with character formation and the development of *phronesis* – to perceive actions in the light of the kind of life one wants to lead. Thus, good actions, when envisaged or remembered, appeal or please, and bad actions appear repulsive or regrettable.

¹⁴² *Idem*, p. 134.

¹⁴³ *NE* 1095b 2-8 (as translated by J. Fink in *op.cit.* p.136)

¹⁴⁴ *NE* 1114a 31 – b 1 (as translated by J. Fink in *op.cit.* p. 137)

¹⁴⁵ *Op.cit.* p. 137

IV Conclusion

In this thesis we have endeavoured to examine Aristotle's and Kant's ethics with a view to understanding and comparing the practical thinking which both authors see as central to the moral life. We have tried to do so through looking at how each sees practical intelligence as working in the concrete, as well as by tracing the starting points proper to each.

Aristotle's realism is clearly founded upon an unshaken confidence in sense experience, leading him to an ethics where the other *as other* is both central and source. All decision making, discernment and acquisition of moral virtue is thus the exercise of the intelligence in the practical domain of human encounters, as often as not of friendship, with another person *as end*; an altruistic life, an in one sense 'ecstatic' ethics. Kant, on the other hand, seeks to develop an ethics true to an arguably idealistic vision of understanding as coming fundamentally from within, as *a priori* knowledge involving transcendental aspects, synthetic in the practical domain but, given our essential similarity and equality on the crucial score of our rationality, not to the point of seeing the reality of the other *as other* in any way as source of my actions.

Perhaps most importantly and significantly of all, the term "end" remains key to both and yet completely differently applied to Aristotle's *phronesis* and to Kant's practical reasoning respectively. For Aristotle the seeing of the end is the first step of *phronesis* and the key to developing the composite moral virtue needed to make possible a constant vision of the end, and discernment of means. For Kant, the end comes primarily from knowing oneself to be an end, an ultimate, and knowing that other such rational beings are also ends in themselves.

Conscience fits in well to Kant's ethics as an important instance of self-regulation, maintaining one's autonomy in the midst of a wider ethics functioning as an internal legal set-up requiring a judiciary system of self-judgement. Aristotle's intimations of something not unlike conscience are harder to find since he did not in his *Ethics* address this reflexive question. Conscience only comes into its own as a critical view on and of oneself. However, we have suggested that the involvement of *phantasia* in the mutually dependent intellectual and moral components of virtue – a question of a *phronesis-guided* effort to end-orient one's feeling, thoughts and decisions – results in a sensitivity adjusted to one's end, including an adjusted *phantasia* able to internally compare memories or projections of action in particular circumstances and so constitute an awareness of what does or does not correspond to the good central to one's life, the end-good.

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