

Comment on Edward Halper: **Two Problems in Aristotelian Ethics**  
by Christine M. Korsgaard

In his paper Edward Halper discusses two questions about Aristotle's ethics, more specifically about his theory of value, which give rise to apparent problems for Aristotle. The first concerns the sense in which happiness or goodness can be quantified, and the second is about whether external goods should be regarded as intrinsically or instrumentally valuable. Halper argues that these questions and the problems to which they lead may be traced to the influence of utilitarianism and Kantianism respectively. More specifically, I think, he believes that the two questions arise from deeply held, insufficiently examined, and characteristically modern assumptions about value, which are associated with or spring from these theories. And these assumptions mislead us when we try to apply them to Aristotle.

Now, I do not agree with Halper's derivation of his second problem from Kantian assumptions. But I do agree with his general point. And I also agree with his assessment of where these modern assumptions go wrong. Halper argues that they go wrong because they fail to take seriously the implications of Aristotle's view that the primary locus, subject, and source of all value is activity. The important achievement of Halper's paper is to bring this fact out clearly.

Every theory of value singles out a most fundamental subject or locus of value, a kind of thing that value primarily resides in. This primary subject will be the source of the value of other kinds of things. For a classical utilitarian, it is the pleasant quality of conscious experiences; for many contemporary consequentialists, it is the satisfaction of desires or preferences; for Kant, it is the good will potential in every person and the actions expressive of that will; for Moore, it is the organic unities. And for Aristotle, it is activity. Aristotle says various things in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that may be used to substantiate

this claim. For instance, in I.8 Aristotle says it must be the exercise of virtue, not just the state, which comprises happiness, since "the state ... may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive." (1098b35ff) Benefactors love those whom they have served, according to Aristotle, because someone you have served is like your own handiwork, and embodies your own activity. Furthermore, pleasures, for Aristotle, are not sensations separate from activities, but either the activities themselves, as in Book VII, or states of mind that supervene on the activities and are proper to them, as in Book X. Finally, friendship is characterized above all not by the feelings or the good will that it involves but by the sharing of activity – by living together and sharing in discussion and thought, or whatever your favorite activities may be. (IX.9 1170b11; See also VIII.5 1157b19ff.; IX.12 1172a1ff.). Indeed, one may gather from what Aristotle says in Book X about contemplation being better with friends that a large part of the point of friendship is the way that it enhances activity. (X.7 1177b34). "By oneself it is not easy to be continuously active," Aristotle says, "but with others and towards others it is easier." (IX.9 1170a5–6 See also VIII.1 1155a15) In these ways Aristotle links the values of virtue, pleasure, and friendship essentially to the value of activity. But it is also important to keep in view, as Halper reminds us, how deeply rooted this conception is in Aristotelian metaphysics. For this view of what is ethically good is grounded in a more general view of what is metaphysically perfect. A thing's activity or "energeia" *is* its complete reality or "entelechia", the perfect expression of its nature. A thing is most properly and perfectly itself when it engages in that activity which essentially makes it the kind of thing that it is. For us, that activity is leading a human life.

I think that there is a deep intuitive appeal about placing all value ultimately in activity. External goods are employed in actions and activities, and get their value from being so employed. Actions are distinguished from activities on the grounds that they are done for the sake of an end or product external to themselves, so the value of an action will depend upon that of its product. So eventually we must trace the value of both actions and

external goods to that of the activities in which they or their products are employed. Perhaps the most serious rivals for the locus of value are pleasure and persons. But Aristotle, as I've mentioned, thinks that pleasure cannot coherently be separated from the pleasant activities themselves. So for him this is not exactly a rival view. The question of the value of persons is more complicated, and I will be coming back to it, but it is not clear that Aristotle would regard even this as a rival view. This is where the metaphysical conception becomes important. Not only is a person's life an activity, but in a certain way the person is identified with that activity. She realizes her essence to the extent that she engages in the activity of leading a human life. Being a person essentially *is* being engaged in human activity, so that perhaps even the value of persons can be understood in terms of the value of human activity.

Now Halper's point is that when this account of the locus of value is properly understood, certain kinds of evaluative questions will be found inappropriate or misleading. The first question Halper discusses concerns the sense in which one life may be "happier" than another, and the related sense in which a happy life is "complete." Those in the utilitarian tradition commonly assume that values must be something that can be added. So whatever a philosopher locates value in, the utilitarian supposes that more of that thing must be better. But if "happier" is understood quantitatively, as signifying some sort of addition, and if the related notion of completeness is understood as signifying some sort of a maximum, then we get the kinds of problems Halper describes. If happiness is complete, then it seems as if it cannot be better. Yet the political life, although happy, can be improved on. If completeness is an inclusive maximum, Aristotle's account seems to call for a maximally inclusive life. This is a problem both because the contemplative life that Aristotle endorses is not maximally inclusive, and because arguably no life is. On the other hand, if value rests in only one virtuous activity, such as contemplation, then it looks as if there must be as much of this activity as possible. Since activities do not come in quantities this has no straightforward meaning, but the usual strategy is to re-interpret it in

terms of the quantity of time spent engaged in the activity. Aristotle is then understood to be proposing that we should spend as much time as possible contemplating. But the life this suggests seems unattractive. According to Halper, these problems may be avoided once we see that "happier" should not be understood quantitatively and completeness should not be understood as a maximum. Living a life as Aristotle sees it is an activity, and the completeness of that life consists in the fact an activity is its own end, done for its own sake and its own sake alone. We may say that the happy life is complete because nothing needs to be added to it in order to make it worth living. But we should not take the idea that nothing needs to be added to imply that there is already "enough" of something in it. It is not a matter of there being "enough" of something in it, but simply a matter of what is in it.

The truth is that whether values can coherently be added depends on what sort of thing we take the primary locus of value to be. I should notice that Kantians run into a similar problem when confronted with this assumption. Since Kant places value in the good will and in actions motivated by a good will, some utilitarians assume that Kant's vision of the good life is one with a maximum number of good deeds. Indeed, some seem to think that Kant is committed to the view that a good world is one with a maximum number of good wills. I have even heard it seriously suggested that if Kant thinks that persons are ends in themselves then he must think we have a duty to maximize procreation. We need not be saddled with these absurdities. We may simply dig in our heels and resist both the insane assumption that everything can be added and the tendentious assumption that *value* must rest in something that allows it to be added. I don't believe that even the value of pleasures can always be added, but certainly that of Kantian good wills and Aristotelian activities cannot.

Halper's other issue is more complex. The question he starts out with concerns the status of external goods, whether they are to be valued instrumentally or for their own sakes. Let me say at the outset that so far as external objects and bodily goods are

concerned – things Halper mentions like health and good looks – I agree with his solution, which I understand this way. These things cannot coherently be separated from the valuable activities in which they are involved or exercised, and they are valued as essential parts of those activities. This kind of value is not naturally understood either as "instrumental" or "intrinsic." I think this is right. I myself have argued elsewhere that Aristotle's theory of value should not be understood in terms of the muddled twentieth century distinction between instrumental and intrinsic goods, but more along the lines of the Kantian distinction between conditioned and unconditioned goods.<sup>i</sup> Unconditioned goods have their value in themselves, while conditioned goods get their value from external circumstances. But conditioned goods may include both instruments and things which are valued for their own sakes. For instance, objects desired for their own sakes may get their value from that very fact. The things Halper mentions may be regarded conditioned ends. Health and good looks are certainly not instruments and are valued for their own sakes, but only because and in the context of certain human activities. Their value is conditional upon their involvement in activity, but this does not mean that they are mere instruments. I agree with Halper about the nature of the value of such things, but I think that Kant could do so as well.

In fact, Halper traces the problem here to Kant by a convoluted route, which I am unable to reconstruct, but which passes through a very peculiar suggestion of John Cooper's to the effect that good looks are valuable because they provide you with sexual temptations which you may enjoy virtuously overcoming. Although Kant may sometimes be guilty of moralizing excesses, I see no reason to blame him for this one. However that may be, I think Halper has conflated two different questions here: first, how the goods employed in activity are to be valued (whether instrumentally or in some other way), and second, *which* activities are to be valued. Halper wants to make two points: first, that Aristotle thinks that pleasant everyday activities exercise virtue and so are valuable, and second, that Aristotle thinks the goods employed in those activities are valued as essential

parts of those activities. I think that both points are correct, but they should be kept separate. Neither would have to be denied by Kant. Kant thinks moral goodness is the *condition* of the value of the things that make us happy, but not that virtuous actions are the only valuable things.

A problem for the Kantian does arise, however, from the way Halper proposes that we think of the value of other persons. Halper himself points out that "any account that makes our children the mere instruments of our happiness is not simply implausible; it is immoral." (p. 6) But although Halper's own account doesn't treat other people as mere instruments, it still places them in the same category as good looks and health. They are valued as essential to our virtuous activities. But this still makes other people merely conditionally valuable. I think here it is helpful to separate two different ways in which, according to Aristotle, other people can enter into our activities. One is that they can be the objects of our activities, as when we treat someone beneficently or perhaps even justly. Then we love them like we love our handiwork. If this were the only relation in which we stood to other people the theory would still be immoral. The other is that other people may actually share our lives and activities, as our friends and families do. In this relation others are not just our objects but our equals. The friend who shares your activity is, as Aristotle says, another self, and valued as such: valued as a fellow person. Of course this does not solve all of the problems about the morality of the theory. Aristotle's account makes it *possible* to value persons in this way, but it does not seem to make it *necessary*. In this sense Aristotle's account of the value we accord to other people falls short of demanding, as Kant does, that we value every person as an end in itself. And on this point I think we must ally ourselves with Kant.

---

<sup>i</sup> "Aristotle and Kant on the Source of Value" *Ethics*, Volume 96, Number 3 (April 1986): 486–505.