

# Relativizing Moral Excellence in Aristotle\*

By: Stephen Leighton

When characterizing excellence, Aristotle tells us that the mean state it consists in is one relative to us. He writes:

Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice, consisting in a mean, the one relative to us, this being determined by reason, and in the way in which one of practical wisdom would determine it.<sup>1</sup>

The surrounding discussion broaches but does not make explicit who the 'us' is, nor the impact of the relativization. Yet resolutions of these issues are not obvious. Moreover, relativizing should profoundly shape the analysis of excellence and particular excellences. In what follows I develop an interpretation of Aristotle's relativizing claim, and consider its effect on the analysis of excellence and particular excellences.

## 1

Raising the question 'Who is the "us" that excellence is relative to?' yields an array of possibilities for which support can be found in Aristotle's thought. It may be taken to remind us that virtuous action, passion, and choice are sensitive to, are relative to, their circumstances. For example, what counts as appropriate anger depends on the particular circumstances the anger responds to. Taken more strongly, the claim can be understood to comment on the internal structure of the state of character that excellence is. That state of character is somehow relative to us, to who we are; differences within character can support differences of excellence, excellence in its full sense. The possibilities here range from some form of individual relativism in which virtuous character is relative to each one of us (Socrates versus any another), to a claim in which excellence is relative to the species (humans versus other kinds). Falling between these extremes are

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interpretations in which excellence is seen to be relative to certain groups of peers (heroes, educated elites...), cultures (Greeks versus Barbarians), and an ideal standard understood on analogy with health and restorative versus unrestored states.<sup>2</sup>

To elucidate each, its variations and other possibilities, to develop their textual support, to test their relative credibility is more than can be undertaken here. Thus I proceed from the following two hypotheses. First, while Aristotle does intend to make the point that virtuous action, passion and choice is sensitive to, is relative to, its circumstance, his characterization of excellence as a state consisting in a mean relative to us does more than that: it makes the nature of excellence and particular excellences in some way dependent upon (relative to) the subjects involved in such a way that their excellence is relative to who they are. Second, while different parts of the Aristotelian corpus can be brought to bear on the question, the context in which the claim quoted at the outset is made is the one in which Aristotle is most likely to have shown his hand. Hence the most plausible procedures depart from this discussion; the better an interpretation coheres with the ongoing discussion the more credible that interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

In light of the second hypothesis, reminders of the context in which the claim is made and its articulation are in order.

## 2

In II.5 Aristotle tells us that excellence is a characteristic of the soul, in particular a state ( $\epsilon\acute{\xi}\tau\iota\varsigma$ ). Chapter six begins by observing that human excellence is a state that makes a human good and do one's work well (1106a15-23). Later it is pointed out that it is a state of character that we are interested in (1106b16), and that this state involves choice (1106b36).

Two sorts of means are distinguished. Both concern the continuous and divisible, of which one can take more, less or an equal amount. In one, the more, less, equal are set in terms of the object itself; in the other, they are relative to us; the equal being an

intermediate between excess and defect (1106a25-29). In the former, the arithmetical mean, the mean is equidistant from the extremes, is one and the same for all; six between two and ten is the illustration.

The mean relative to us, by contrast, need not be equidistant from the extremes but is neither too much nor too little, and is not one nor the same for all (1106a29-33). Here, then, the extremes admit of different means; the mean is not sought in terms of a midpoint, is not one nor the same for all. Aristotle illustrates his point with food consumed by Milo, a runner, and a beginner at athletic exercises. They needn't choose the same amount, and yet each may have chosen the mean amount.

### 3

These thoughts on the mean relative to us have both epistemological and ontological consequences: epistemological, because knowledge of the intermediate must consider the differences between the subjects; ontological, because the intermediate itself is not one nor the same for all, but differs according to its subject.

By speaking of amounts to be eaten the illustration is quantitative and addresses activities rather than states of character. We can infer that the quantitative aspect is incidental to Aristotle's concern by his extension of the claim to the arts in general (1106b7ff.), and his explanation of acting in accord with the mean by doing the right thing, at the right time, towards the right people... (1106b18ff.). On our interpretive hypothesis, we take it that he wants us to see something about states of character (not simply activities), understanding that he has had to use the evidence of sensible things to get at what is imperceptible (1104a13-4), and that this has been a procedure relied upon throughout book II.

If, then, the examples are to inform us about the states of character of those involved, we know that just as the choices are not one nor the same for all nor equidistant from the extremes to attain the mean relative to us, so also states of character attain the mean relative to us without being one nor the same for all, nor lying equidistant from the

extremes. We have some grasp of what it means to say that states of character attain the mean without being equidistant from the extremes of vice. Cowardice more than rashness is opposed to courage (1109a1-11). But that the state of character that is excellence is not one nor the same for all is more problematic.

Now because Aristotle's illustrations of the mean relative to us are within humankind, and it is within this context that the mean is not one nor the same for all, he indicates that differences amongst individual persons can display differences of excellence. He makes room for differences of excellence between, say, Socrates, Pericles and Nicias, rather than to contrast human excellence with that of other creatures. Thus a simple species interpretation of the 'relative to us' claim is not what the text suggests.

But if we are to be dislodged from a straightforward species interpretation, a worry is that the apparent appreciation of differences in excellence between individuals entails an individual relativism in which each has their own excellence. The concern here is not simply for how individual relativism will account for the continent, vicious and brutish, but for the potentially extreme fragmentation within excellence, and the danger that the account thereby loses sight not just of the species but of any other boundary as morally significant, focusing instead on the peculiarities of the individual. Moreover, this account may also be construed to embrace individual essences, something that Aristotle was not obviously committed to.

Fortunately, these concerns need not be realized: further attention to the examples suggests a different approach. The choice of Milo as an example hardly betrays an interest in typical or representative persons, an Everyman. Furthermore, the interest expressed is not simply for individuals. For the contrasts drawn are Milo versus others, wrestling versus running, the beginner versus the experienced. In these terms the mean is 'relative to us'. Hence an inference to excellence relative to each one of us is unwarranted. Rather the examples reflect a view in which the 'us' are the members of the human community grouped by their capacities (Milo versus others), their activities (wrestling versus running), and their stage or level of participation (a beginner versus

Milo). It is in these terms that we are to understand that the mean is not one nor the same for all. This, in turn, effects the point that we do not look for what is equidistant or a midpoint in terms of the extremes in question: the intermediate is set in terms of a person's capacities, activities and stage of development. There we find excellence, but because the activities, capacities and stages of persons differ so does their mean, their excellence.

Reference to capacities, activities, and stage or level of development covers a large territory, and directs us to much of interest. Reference to capacities, because the concern is to be limited to states of character (1106b16), should include both the psychological makeup of persons (e.g. personality traits) and physiological makeup where that makeup bears on character (e.g. Down's syndrome versus the structure of double joints). Activities should include socialization, other forms of habituation, occupation, pursuits, special pleasures, as well as more routine activities. Stage or level of development would seem to make room for differences of development, achievement, and time of life. So seen, they provide an intriguing basis to differentiate within moral excellence, where that differentiating is to be a matter of excellence in its full sense.

#### 4

Reflection on Aristotle's illustrations suggests an interpretation of what it does and does not mean to think of excellence as a state consisting in a mean relative to us. But we shall have to reflect further on these suggestions if we are to have anything like a full account of excellence.

Striking features of this suggested view, hereafter attribute relativism, can be seen when it is set beside a species view. Like a species view, attribute relativism uses the confines of the biological kind. For the capacities, activities, and stage of development Aristotle is concerned with are those of we humans. Thus it is a view that respects the significance of the species boundaries; but then it can augment these with insights of its own.

For example, Aristotle is strongly committed to essentialism, and gives prominence to natural kinds in that essentialism. Relatedly, he situates his ethical concern in terms of the human good (1094b8) and speaks of human excellence (1102a16). Such points make the species an important point of demarcation. For it is our natural kind, that we are human, that rules out any 'excellence' of other species being incorporated into the account that Aristotle is developing. It is our essence as a rational creature, one whose moral excellence is bound up with practical wisdom, that structures our excellence differently from the 'moral' states of other kinds (cf. 1116b25-1117a9, 1145a25-26, Politics 1253a7-18). That said, Aristotle's appreciation of the importance of differing capacities, activities, and stages of development suggests that there are further features within our species which are morally significant, requiring differences in the determinations of the mean. In his account of temperance, for example, Aristotle notes that we might have special pleasures in terms of which our temperance must be placed (1118b21, 27), and that our time of life with its attendant desires is a term in which our temperance may differ (1118b10). Or, to return to an earlier example, the contrasts between Nicias, Socrates, and Pericles because of their differing spheres of activity, capacity and stage of development make room for distinctions within, say, the excellence of honesty.

Thus, like a straightforward species view, attribute relativism maintains Aristotle's concern for the human good and excellence, but maintains that the possession of that good can admit of different means. Yet in offering this differentiation within the species, Aristotle is not appealing to differences in excellence simply because the subjects are different (an individual relativism). For the differences in excellence are more deeply based than the nonidentity of subjects. Human excellence, while allowing for differentiation, has not been radically fragmented; the peculiarities of persons have not become focal; essences for individuals have not been implied. For the account of excellence is to be given in terms of human activities, capacities and stage of development.

Further, in accord with the requirement that the mean relative to us is not one nor the same for all, and the indication of how this is determined, attribute relativism makes no supposition of an ideal standard or paradigm of excellence equally applicable to all of excellence. Rather a concatenation of relevant subgroups set in terms of species boundaries determines the mean, the mean that is relative to us. Thus neither Milo, the runner nor beginner are impugned simply because they are different in excellence. And while each aims at the target of excellence, what counts as hitting the right mark differs in light of the capacities, activities and stage of development of those involved.<sup>4</sup> Hereby attribute relativism appreciates the examples, and the claims that the mean relative to us is not one nor the same for all, nor equidistant from the extremes.

Given earlier admissions, attribute relativism (an ontological theory), requires corresponding epistemological procedures. For it is not just that the mean is not one nor the same for all, and that the differences are set out in terms of activities, capacities and stage of development, but also that the determination of the mean is in terms of those same activities, capacities, and stages of development. Moreover, all this has implications beyond states of character. For what it is for a person to feel and act appropriately, then, will take into account not only the circumstances of the person (1106b13ff.), but also the person him or herself. Placing persons of excellence, such as Nicias and Socrates, in identical circumstances needn't yield identical choices, passions and actions, even though the choices etc. are virtuous: excellence and its activities are relative to who we are.

So far, attribute relativism is developed and also supported on the grounds that it takes seriously and exploits fully the examples Aristotle uses to illustrate his claim of a mean relative to us; that in so doing it takes to heart and provides intelligibility to Aristotle's claims that a mean relative to us is not one nor the same for all, and that the search is not for a midpoint; that it does all this while remaining within the human domain, retaining Aristotle's metaphysical commitments to natural kinds and essentialism; that some passing remarks concerning the excellence temperance fits this rather well; and

that in so doing it provides an intriguing analysis of excellence.

5

Some restrictions upon human capacities, activities and stage of development must be in place if attribute relativism is to accommodate much that Aristotle says about the nature of excellence and excellences. If not, subgroups formed on a) irrelevant bases (e.g., abilities to form mental images) and b) morally offensive or inadequate bases (e.g., willingness to murder) are not barred. For example, if some have an incredible fear of mice, and then develop a mean state with respect to said capacities, related activities and stage, then those with these characteristics form a grouping of us within which certain choices, actions, passions, and developed character satisfy the mean relative to them, and so should be counted as courageous --even though they are dreadfully afraid of mice and hampered by that fear. Thus without further restrictions upon capacities, activities or stages but that they are human and concern character, room has been left for a mean in a defect of character, here a phobia. Since these consequences are themselves counterintuitive, run contrary to much that Aristotle holds about excellence, and to parts of his present exposition of excellence (1107a10-12), attribute relativism, to be plausible, must be able to bar such subgroups as relevant to the determination of a proper mean.

Clearly an appeal to other elements in Aristotle's characterization of excellence will help, namely, what the practically wise determine and what reason dictates. For we may assume that reason would not dictate nor the practically wise determine such groupings as satisfying the mean. This is not simply an appeal to their authority. Rather the explanation for so determining and so dictating can be found within Aristotle's general framework for his discussion of excellence.

The discussion of excellence arises in the context of Aristotle's investigation of humans and their good (1094b6). More particularly, human excellence is a state that makes a human good and do his or her work well (1106a21-23); the state of excellence is both choiceworthy for itself and for the sake of happiness (1097b2-5). All of this is to be

understood in terms of human function and the end of happiness (1097b22-98a20).

When these restrictions are placed upon what counts as a relevant subgroup, Aristotle can plausibly argue that persons afraid of mice (even should praise be due because they are dealing well with their phobia) are not virtuous. Their state of character does not allow them to function well, is not itself choiceworthy, and prevents achievement of the human good, happiness. In contrast to others, their character and activity are impaired. Thus not any human capacity, stage or activity having to do with character determines a relevant mean state, but only those that satisfy the above restrictions.<sup>5</sup> Similar points can be made about those who form subgroups on irrelevant, offensive, etc., bases.

So it seems that within Aristotle's argument there are restrictions applicable to the subgroups, such that attribute relativism coheres with normal intuitions about who counts as virtuous, avoids problems of phobic courage, confines the discussion to humans, yet finds that within those confines excellence is not one nor the same for all, and does so without impugning differences in excellence.

## 6

Further support for this approach comes later in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. When thinking about the procedures of medicine and gymnastic instruction in order to help understand law-making, Aristotle points out that the details have to be left to expert appraisal. Prescriptions may differ; not all will learn to box in the same style. Nevertheless, the instructor:

... or anyone else who has the universal knowledge must know what is good for everyone or for people of a certain kind (for the sciences both are said to be, and are, concerned with what is universal) ... (1180b14-16)

Here points about the species are important, but Aristotle does not restrict his thought to species considerations: he extends it to further differences. Later (1181b3ff.), when considering medical treatment, Aristotle concerns himself not just for treatments in general but how particular classes of people can be cured and should be treated.<sup>6</sup>

While the primary interest in both these quotations is the nature of knowledge rather than excellence, in both knowledge, which invokes the universal, operates at a level which features formal differences amongst members --yet this within the general context and limitations of the species. Here too matters are not one nor the same for all. Moreover, the differences considered are plausibly accounted for in terms of the capacities of those involved, their stage of development and activities. These thoughts on medicine and health (important analogies to excellence for Aristotle) cohere nicely with the claim that excellence is relative to us, where the 'us' are seen to be persons grouped by their capacities, activities and developmental state, and where the mean is not one nor the same for all. Thus what is here proposed for excellence has important analogues elsewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Outside the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a striking passage that seems to support and augment the present interpretation is the following.

Clearly, then, excellence of character belongs to all of them; but the temperance of a man and a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying. And this holds of all other excellences, as will be more clearly seen if we look at them in detail, for those who say generally that excellence consists in a good disposition of the soul or in doing rightly, or the like, only deceive themselves. Far better than such definitions is the mode of speaking of those who, like Gorgias, enumerate the excellences. All classes must be deemed to have their special attributes; as the poet says of women. 'Silence is a woman's glory,' but this is not equally the glory of man. The child is incomplete, and therefore obviously his excellence is not relative to himself alone, but relative to one complete, to his teacher, and in like manner the excellence of the slave is relative to a master. (*Politics* 1260a19-33)

Here too a diversity of positions satisfy the mean, all of which fall within our species. Once again, excellence is not the same (nor, it seems, one). As the courage and

temperance of a man versus a woman illustrates, each has attained the mean, the mean relative to them. As before, who we are makes a difference in our mean, our excellence.

Here the explanation of who we are appeals to the special character of the groups. Given the examples, this is an appeal to our nature (e.g., that of a man versus woman), which in Aristotle's view, is primarily a matter of capacities but also related activities.<sup>7</sup> The contrast between the incomplete (imperfect) child and the complete (perfect) teacher brings our attention to the stage of development, but does so in a way that augments the position gathered from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For the point here isn't that the child has its own excellence, but that the child's excellence is incomplete (ατελής) and thus prospective by being relative to the τέλος the child is to attain. The slave example is slightly different. For we can't expect the slave to acquire the excellence of the master (cf. *Politics* 1254a8-17). The parallel between the slave and child is that their source of excellence (1260b3) is outside themselves.

The picture in the *Politics*, then, is more developed. For the most part, it reinforces the attribute interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but concludes by adding (unsurprisingly) that the excellence of some is relative to their τέλος, and that that of others is subservient. But what remains crucial is that even in this development of the attribute view, the τέλος to which the excellence of the child and slave is relative is not some ideal standard for all. Moreover, it seems that the concern is for humans grouped by their capacities, activities, and stage of development, e.g., a man versus a woman, a child and its teacher, a slave and its master.<sup>8</sup>

## 7

So far, the argument provides an answer to the question of who the 'us' is, an explanation of and justification for that understanding. But for the occasional aside, it has not shown how that answer affects Aristotle's accounts of particular excellences. On first glance attribute relativizing has made little impact on the analyses of the excellences in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; indeed the phrase προς ημας does not appear in the discussions of

particular excellences. Rather the discussions of individual excellences seem perfectly general.

A failure to draw attention to attribute relativizing in the *Nicomachean Ethics*' account of individual excellences could be explained in a number of ways, but the explanation most congenial to the present analysis would reveal influences of attribute relativizing at work in those accounts. In the remainder of the paper I shall outline some of the influence it does have. This should help to make clear the sort of differences Aristotle's relativizing makes to accounts of individual excellences, display the differences made by activity, capacity and stage of development, allay suspicions that the conclusions so far don't really depict Aristotle's thinking, and suggest complexities in the accounts of particular excellences that are not typically seen.

Glimmerings of relativizing the mean to us can be seen in the account of courage. There, after giving a general account of courage, Aristotle speaks of derivative senses of courage, that in the sense possessed by the citizen soldier, in the sense of the experienced, of passion, of those sanguine or ignorant of danger (1116a18ff.). What the state of character is like varies accordingly, and that variation seems to depend both on the capacities of those involved (the passionate versus the sanguine), and on their activities and stages of development (the experienced versus the citizen soldier).

Nonetheless, Aristotle's thoughts on courage do not provide what we seek here. For the related states, though bearing a similarity to courage, are, he says, not true senses of courage (1116a16-17, b34-1117a2, 1117a6-10, 28). We have differences in 'courage' rather than courage. Still what remains striking about the cases is that differences in who we are --understood in terms of our capacities, activities and stages of development-- account for the differences in these states of character.<sup>9</sup>

Another place that relativizing seems to crop up is in Aristotle's contrast between the crowning excellence and more ordinary excellence. Great-souled persons (*μεγαλοψυχοι*) seem heroic, being perfect in excellence (1124a28), thinking that they are worthy of great things and being so (1123b1-2). The temperate person (*σωφρων*)

likewise rightly thinks him or herself worthy of the things that she or he is worthy of, but these are comparatively minor (1123b4-5). Temperance would seem the excellence for normal mortals by virtue of their normal capacities and activities; great-souledness seems to be the excellence for the likes of Socrates or Ajax by virtue of their extraordinary capacities and activities. But because our capacities, activities and level of achievement may not reach theirs is not to deny that we or they are without excellences of character: both temperance and great-souledness remain excellences of character. Rather we normal mortals form a different 'us', are cut from a different cloth.

Similarly, the contrast between the magnificent and the generous draws a difference in excellence on the basis of a different us. The magnificent is generous, but generosity does not imply magnificence (1122a28-9). The magnificent differs from the generous both by being concerned exclusively with giving, and more significantly by performing great works, greatly, at great expense for one's community (1122a20ff.). In this case differentiating groups such that certain members are generous while others are magnificent is primarily based on their capabilities, here economic, and consequently on their activities and stage of participation. Generous persons have ordinary means at their disposal and act for the benefit of others; magnificent persons have extraordinary means at their disposal and can act on that basis for the noble --though magnificence also has to do with doing well with what one has at one's disposal (1122b13).

Unlike the case of courage, here the differences in character are differences of virtuous character. Hence they better exemplify our interpretation. Nevertheless, they do not stand as paradigms for how relativizing effects the account of excellence. For here differences in 'us' have moved Aristotle to speak of different excellences, not differences within particular excellences. Perhaps this is conformity to linguistic practices on Aristotle's part, and a deeper analysis would find each pair to be species of an excellence. Nonetheless, one would like an example of Aristotle's in which differences in 'us' meant differences in excellence, and the same excellence at that.

Although not well developed, Aristotle begins to satisfy both demands within the

accounts of magnificence and generosity. Amongst the magnificent, the sort of gift to be given is relative to the agent, as well as the circumstances and purpose (1122a24-6). The gift's fittingness in being relative to the agent concerns both (i) what means the agent has and (ii) who the agent is (1122b24-7). It is clear how being relative to the agent concerns (i) the means at the agent's disposal: magnificent acts depend on the degree of wealth at one's disposal (cf. 1122a23). Speaking of (ii) who the agent is is less clear, but seems to make room for differences in interest, social position, etc. For what the magnificent does must not only be worthy, but also suit the producer and product (1122b26). Aristotle offers the example of giving a wedding as a magnificent act (1123a1); and it would seem that one's magnificence takes this form because the person to be wed is specially bound to one. Thus depending on what resources one has, what concerns and roles one takes in the lives of others, there will be differences in 'us' and thereby differences within the excellence. Again, when speaking of generosity, Aristotle concerns himself with differences amongst persons in their giving, depending on how they acquired their money (1120b11-14): one is much more attached to it if one has made it oneself, in part, because it is the manifestation of one's own activities, and thereby deeply bound up with one's identity (cf. 1161b16-30, 1168a5-10, a22-5). Here too there seem to be differences in 'us' that yield differences of the excellence. Further, Aristotle's claim of varieties of ungenerosity may find its explanation in terms of differences in 'us' (cf. *Eudemian Ethics* 1232a9-16). Magnificence and generosity, then, provide more of what we seek.

One might argue that the differences within generosity and magnificence are differences in circumstance, purpose, and activity only. That is, the differences are to be understood as differences in the extent to which the excellences are displayed, but not thereby differences in the structure of character. To so argue, I believe, fails to appreciate the effect on personality and the resulting state of character of, say, earning rather than inheriting wealth, having a favourite in one's life, etc. But perhaps the way to dispel these concerns most fully is to consider an example in which Aristotle satisfies the previous demands of differences in 'us' effecting excellence, the same excellence --and

does so in a way that more clearly reveals that the differences concern the structure of the excellence, not simply the circumstances of action.

Friendship, which is or at least involves excellence (1155a4), is or involves states of character where Aristotle best satisfies these demands. According to Aristotle, friendships differ depending on whether they are based on utility, pleasure or character (1156a6-10).<sup>10</sup> The sorts of friendships we engage in has much to do with our time of life and general disposition (1156a24-6, 1157b15, 1158a3-10). Thus the kinds of human interactions that we are capable of and/or participate in (both quite generally and with regard to particular others) determine the structure of the excellence that we have. For example, the friendships available to an evil person are restricted to those of pleasure or utility (1157a16-19). As a result of who they are, base persons can form friendships but not friendships of character --where this concerns not only their activities but also the excellence concerning friendship.

Here we satisfy the above demands. Since Aristotle sees friendships of pleasure and utility as derivative forms of friendship, and friendships of character as genuine and distinctly human friendships (1156a13-21, 1156b7-15, 1157a30-2, *Eudemian Ethics* 1236b1-5), the claim that differences of 'us' determine differences in excellence should also be sought within friendships of character --lest, like the case of courage, it seem that we are being equivocal in our notion of friendship and excellence.

Friendship for Aristotle depends on community, association (1159b25-33, 1161b11). Whether an association is one of equals or unequals makes a good deal of difference (1158b12-15). In different sorts of associations and corresponding activities the friendship, feelings, excellence and function of each differs, as does the reason for the love (1158b14-20, cf. 1159b35-1160a3). The type of community or association one is capable of and/or participates in, then, would seem to form different groupings and different types of friendship and excellence. If so, we have varieties of the excellence depending on the 'us' in question, determined by our capacities, activities and, as we shall see, stage or level of development.

Aristotle's thoughts on the family help to illustrate these conclusions. Parents are thought capable of a depth of love toward their children not available to the child towards its parents --and mothers more so than fathers (1168b25). In part this results because the parent's love is present from the beginning, but not so the child's (1161b25). More importantly, children are the activity, the work, the product of their parents; and as their activity the children are the actualization of the parent, and, a sort of other but separate self (1161b16-30, 1167b28-68a28). Contrariwise, the child, as recipient of the greatest of benefits (1162a6-8), loves the parent not as him or herself, but as his or her cause (1161b28-30), and incurs an obligation towards the parent that quite simply can't be repaid (1164b5). Moreover, what is just in these cases is not the same but corresponds to the worth, as does the friendship itself (1161a21-23). In contrast, the friendship of equals --say, brothers-- shares not these features, but ones incurred through a common upbringing, an association through their parents, and time spent together (1161b30-1162a3 cf. 1162a10-16). Throughout the honour due varies with the relationship and role (1165a22-7).

Who we are, as equal or unequal, taking the particular form of parent, mother, child, or brother, --and where these, in turn, have much to do with our capacities, our activities, and our stage of development-- determines differences in the shape of the love and the excellence, each appropriate to the relevant group. The concern of a mother for her child differs considerably from the child's for its mother. The relationship, the love and the excellence involved allows the parent a love and concern that the child, the beneficiary, cannot attain. The bonds of brothers depend on quite different factors and features of character. Thus in the differences in the friendship between parent, child and sibling, the structure of the excellence concerning friendship is shaped by one's life as child and/or parent and/or sibling --where this is much more than a comment about differences of circumstances or display, and where none fail simply by being unable to achieve what the other does.

The point is not confined to the family. Hunters, dice players, lovers of wisdom,

members of dining clubs or a democracy are groups of equals, but the excellence concerning friendship found in the different groups is not thereby the same. The excellence of those who spend their time together engaged in contemplation shares few features with the excellence of those who play dice together. The excellence found in a political friendship between, say, members of a democracy would seem to differ again, centring on matters of concord. Hence the kind of excellence had concerning friendship reflects differences in the character of those involved, in who we are. And this has been determined by the capacities, activities and level of development by those involved.<sup>11</sup>

The differences in 'us' determining differences in friendship shapes other excellences as well. According to Aristotle it is much more just to help and much more disgraceful to fail to help a brother than a stranger (1159b36-1160a8). Generally, what is just is not the same for a friend as for a stranger (1160a31- 3). So the shape of justice shifts, depending on relationships of friendship. Moreover, justice and friendship cover much the same area of concern (1159b25-1160a9), requiring things in common (1161a33-6). But friendship makes justice unnecessary (1155a27-9). Thus who we are through our capacities for and activities of friendship renders the excellence of justice necessary or unnecessary.

While the first of these points concerns the display of excellence, both suggest differences in the nature of justice in terms of who one is --here dependent upon the relationships one does or does not have with others. Relationships of justice and its excellence in part rely on the relationships of friendship, and that on community, and that on who is involved --where who is involved, we have seen, depends heavily on a person's capacities, activities and level of development.

In Aristotle's account of friendship we have much of what we should expect given a commitment to attribute relativism. Excellence is not one nor the same for all; the nature of the excellence is shaped by who we are. Different associations and activities, different capacities and stages of development determine different groups of us, and differences within the same excellence --all of which can fully realize the mean.

Aristotle's thought suggests an intriguing complexity within the account of excellence, our mean depends on who we are.<sup>12</sup>

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## Notes

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1. Aristotle, *NE* 1106b36-1107a2, based on translations by D. Ross (revised by J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson, as found in *A New Aristotle Reader*, edited by Ackrill, Princeton, 1987), and T. Irwin (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Hackett, 1985). Unless otherwise indicated, references are to the *Nicomachean Ethics*; other translations are based on J. Barnes' revisions of the Oxford translations of *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Many of these interpretations find adherents amongst commentators. J.O. Urmson in *Aristotle's Ethics* (Basil Blackwell, 1988) adopts a circumstance sensitivity approach. J.A. Stewart's gloss on the mean as the mean relative to me suggests a version of individual relativism (*Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford, 1892). M. Nussbaum's 'Virtues: an Aristotelian Approach' presents a version of species relativism (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 1988). A. MacIntyre tilts towards peer group relativism (*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Philosophy*, Notre Dame, 1981). H.H. Joachim (*Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* Oxford, 1951) offers a version of the idealized standard. Cultural relativism I have not found endorsed by commentators.

<sup>3</sup> Arguments that support these hypotheses are to be found in my paper, 'The Mean Relative to Us: Strategies for Interpretation and Interpretations,' *Aristotle, Virtue and the Mean* (edited by R. Bosley, R. Shiner, and J. Sison).

<sup>4</sup> One might argue that behind these means there must be a mean, a standard, in virtue of which the other means are means. The suggestion is Platonic, one I hope that the ongoing discussion will dispel. However, where one thinks not in terms of an idealized or paradigm case but a formal characterization of excellence, such as we find quoted at the beginning of this paper, then the suggestion is acceptable.

<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the restrictions mentioned are the only ones relevant; nor shall I attempt to detail all the restrictions that emerge in Aristotle. However, in outline, one can say that the subgroups relevant would be those subgroups (determined by capacities, activities and stage of development) which when combined with an acceptable process of habituation result in a state of character that satisfies both a) the characterization of excellence quoted at the outset of this paper, and b) other formal characterizations of excellence, most notably that i) the state be choiceworthy for itself and for the sake of happiness and ii) the state makes the human being good and perform her or his function well.

<sup>6</sup> In this discussion Aristotle seems to comment upon sorts of persons and particular persons. That he comments on individuals does not harm my thesis. For it seems quite clear that

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the concern for individuals is qua certain sorts. It may well be, for example, that given the striking nature of Milo, the exact details of the his medical treatment (or his excellence) are unique to him, but they are so only by virtue of being a unique member of the compilation of relevant sorts. (See also *Pol* 1335b5-8; *Rhet* 1356b29.)

<sup>7</sup> I take Aristotle to be thinking of *Meno* 71E in this passage, siding with Meno and Gorgias against Socrates. If so, that activities are indeed crucial is highlighted in the *Meno*.

<sup>8</sup> I hereafter ignore the refinements suggested in this passage, both for the sake of convenience and because the principal interest remains the position as can be gathered from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to consider why the related states are not different forms of courage. In some cases, at least, it has to do with a failure to satisfy some of the restrictions placed upon the subgroups. Aristotle's remarks about those acting from passion suggest that they do not have the end of excellence. The state of the citizen soldier can be made to serve the human good, but is not chosen for itself.

<sup>10</sup> The claim about friendship's connection to excellence is least controversially understood to mean that there is a special excellence associated with friendship. As we might say, the excellence concerning friendship (1), rather than friendship, the excellence (2) --where the former (1) is meant to be stronger than the point that (3) many (all) excellences can be found in the context of friendship. That Aristotle doesn't mean three is borne out in the analysis to follow, and because the point is so banal as not to be worth remarking upon here. That Aristotle holds one rather two can be defended on the basis of a connection between *φιλία* and *παθος*, whereas excellence is a *εξις* (c.f. *Nicomachean Ethics* II.5, *Rhetoric* II.4). I myself think that Aristotle does hold thesis two, viewing *φιλία* as a *εξις* and an excellence, with *φιλησις* and *φιλειν* as the relevant *παθος* (See, for example, 1158a29). If so, the conclusion sought in the argument to follow would be easily had. However, to be persuasive more generally, the argument offered will use the less controversial understanding (1).

<sup>11</sup> A fear that the differentiation within friendship becomes idle because the wealth of relevant subgroups yields homogeneity in the excellence is unwarranted. For while we do participate in an array of subgroups, differences in the excellence concerning friendship are directed towards specific individuals, and thereby resist homogeneity. Moreover, each of us participates in but a few of the possible subgroups: human capabilities, activities, stages and opportunities are diversely distributed, as are the consequent forms of friendship and excellence.

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<sup>12</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were read before Christ Church College, Oxford University, and the Philosophy Department, Queen's University, Kingston; and by R. Bosley, G. Harris, L. Judson, R. Polansky, G. Rubinstein, and R. Shiner, amongst others. As well, these ideas have been presented to a number of classes. I am grateful for all the help that I have received.