

## The Mean Relative to Us<sup>\*</sup>

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A striking qualification in the *Nicomachean Ethics*' characterization of virtue is the use of 'proō h(maj', 'relative to us'.

Ἔστιν αἴτιον ἡ ἀρεθῆλεκτιῶν προαιρετικῶν ἐν μεσοῦσιν οὐσα τῶν προō h(maj, ἡ δὲ ἰσότης καὶ ἡ ἀρεθῆλεκτιῶν οὐκ ἀπὸ φρονημοῦ ὀρίσεται.

Virtue, 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>

This qualification seems capable of profoundly shaping Aristotle's account of virtue as a mean. And while it is abundantly clear that in speaking of the mean relative to us Aristotle wishes to direct us away from an arithmetical mean towards a proportionate one, exactly how the qualification is meant to be understood is far from clear, as is the question of who the 'us' is.

Nevertheless, two general strategies for interpreting the qualification can and should be discerned. It will be my purpose to set forth and illuminate each of these strategies, some of their implications and contrasts, as well as to determine which best suits the argument of II 6.

### I

On the first of these strategies, Aristotle's relativizing claim concerns (only) the

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choices, actions and passions of persons in the circumstances of virtuous activity. How particular circumstances affect actions, choices, and passions that are to attain the mean is Aristotle's concern.

J.O. Urmson seems to voice this sort of understanding when he says:

'By saying that the mean is relative to us Aristotle is making it clear that he is not using any mathematical notion, such as those of an arithmetic or geometrical mean, but that the mean is determined by, is relative to, *all the circumstances* in which the *choice of actions* has to be made.'<sup>2</sup>

On this view what will count as, *for example*, proportionate anger, appropriate choice and action will have much to do with the circumstances: the sort and degree of insult, whether the remark was intended, who was present, who gave offense, their position, and so on. The same remark made by a trusted friend in a quiet moment, a long time adversary at a public *forum*, a petulant or affable student in class may demand different emotional responses, levels of response, choices, and actions. Strictly speaking, then, it is not the mean state of character itself that is relative to us: rather the mean state of character concerns choices, passions and actions which are proportionate by being relative to their circumstances. In our example, it is not that the virtue good temper itself is in some way relative to the agent, her or his character, but that its appropriate manifestations are relative to the circumstances in which her or his good temper is called upon. We can call this circumstance relativity.

The second strategy takes 'relative to us' to have a more significant impact upon the account of the mean. While granting that to be proportionate actions, choices and passions of virtue must be responsive to their circumstances (strategy one), this understanding takes Aristotle's claim *also* to make a point about virtuous character itself. What counts as virtuous character is itself something relative to us, relative to

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who we are. On this reckoning individuals may differ with respect to virtue yet be fully virtuous - where this is to be explained by noting that what counts as being virtuous is relative to us, to who we are. As we might say, our ethical identities are relative to who we are.

Some remarks by J.A. Stewart seem to gesture in this direction.

From this absolute mean, however, we must distinguish the relative mean, or "mean for me", which is not the half of the thing and the same for all men, but that amount which is neither too much nor too little *for me* – that that amount which *exactly suits me in my particular circumstances...*<sup>3</sup>

Here Stewart acknowledges the first strategy's claims about particular circumstances. But by speaking of the 'mean for me', and by explaining this in terms of what 'exactly suits me in my particular circumstances' (not simply what exactly suits my particular circumstances) he also addresses the character, the ethical identity, of the agent.

Concerning our example, then, it is not simply a matter of the appropriate manifestations of good temper being relative to their circumstances, but also the mean state that is good temper in some way being relative to the agent, her or his character. We can call this character relativity.<sup>4</sup>

## II

The implications of each strategy differ significantly. Because the first strategy understands any concern for who the us is to be a concern for how relevant circumstances bear on the proportionate nature of choices, passions, and actions, and because one's circumstances as well as the choices, passions, and actions are individual and unique, determination of their proportionate nature will be a matter for agents in particular circumstances (see 1104a5-9). Beyond particular determinations, there could be no general specification or designation of who the us is that the mean is relative to - especially for an ethical treatise which is to give accounts in general and

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in outline, and which takes accounts of particular cases to be most inexact (see 1094b11-26, 1104a1-9).<sup>5</sup> On this strategy, therefore, the question of who the *us* is cannot be further pursued, though discussions of particular cases - as earlier begun for anger can be illuminating.

In contrast, because the second strategy includes a more general concern than that of particular circumstances, namely the relativity of character itself, the question of who the *us* is remains one that can and should be pursued if we are to illuminate Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Moreover, on this strategy an array of possible determinations of who the *us* is will emerge; one needn't be committed to Stewart's thesis that the mean is a 'mean for me'. For example, one might suppose that the mean was relative to our species, to a heroic (or some other) peer group, to an idealized paradigm, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Further implications of this strategy can be best illustrated using a particular version; let us stay with the 'mean for me'. Minimally, the 'mean for me' contrasts the 'mean for you', suggesting, in principle, a mean relative to each one of us. Here, then, it becomes possible that each of us could be fully virtuous, though differently so; the state of character that is our mean is relative to each one of us. Your good temper may differ from mine but it doesn't thereby follow that there is any sort of failure in either of us: each of us may have attained the mean relative to us.

Given this, it also seems to follow that were each of us to face the 'same' situation, what counts as appropriate choice, action and passion could differ according to our own mean.<sup>7</sup> For example, if you were faced by the remark earlier spoken of, and I too, and if our situations were the same, then it need not follow that you should act and choose as I, or vice versa, or even that each of us should be moved to anger in the same degree or anger at all- even though we both fully display good temper. You may be slow to anger, whereas I may be comparatively readily roused; again, because of who we are what will count as insulting may differ for each of us, and so on. Here

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differences in appropriate emotional arousal, response, and choice arise not because our circumstances are different but because *we* are different - where the differences between us concerns our virtue, our ethical identity, being relative to us (rather than [simply] the psychological claim about individual variation).

These implications hold for other versions of character relativity as well. That is, there will be differences in virtuous character arising through the relativity to the relevant group(s). And these differences in appropriate character, in turn, affect differences in what counts as the appropriate action, passion and choice, doing so independently from any variation due to differences in circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Hence which version of the second strategy is to be adopted (if indeed one is to be adopted) will be crucial to what counts as the appropriate shapes of character, appropriate variation amongst persons, as well as appropriate action(s), passion(s), choice(s) - where this latter depends both on the effect of circumstances and relevant character. Further, while variation on each version of this strategy (as well as other construals entirely) is (are) possible, what remains common on all versions of this second strategy is that the question about ethical identity, 'Who is the us?' can and must be pursued (not only the articulations of cases) if we are to understand Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, on the first interpretive strategy, different situations may elicit different responses, but the 'same' situation should elicit the same response: because according to the first strategy, virtue is sensitive to, is relative to (simply) our circumstances, not (also) to us. The shape of virtuous character won't admit the differences just envisaged, and there can't be differences in virtuous choice, action and passion dependant upon differences in virtuous character.

### III

## From Aristotle, *Virtue and the Mean*

To determine which interpretative strategy best suits our text, we should review how Aristotle's account of virtue introduces the idea that the mean is relative to us. With this in mind we can better assess the merits of each strategy.<sup>10</sup>

In II 5 Aristotle concludes that virtue, a characteristic of the soul, is neither a passion (πάθος) nor a capacity, power (δύναμις) but a state (εἶς). In Chapter 6 he sets out to tell us what sort of state it is (1106aI415). He begins with some general features of virtue, concluding that the virtue of a human is a state that makes a human good and do one's work well (1106aI6-23).

Aristotle then turns to our concern: he introduces two types of means. Both concern what is continuous and divisible, that of which it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount (τὸ ἴσον), and in which the equal is some intermediate, mean or middling (μέσον) between excess and deficiency (1106a26-8).

The first sort of mean that Aristotle examines is an intermediate in terms of the thing (object) itself (κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα, 1106a29), an intermediate concerning the object (του=μεν πραγματοῖ μέσον, 1106a2930). The determination of this mean is in terms of that which is equidistant from each of the extremes (1106a30-1). What is determined is said to be one and the same for all (1106a31). The illustration of the mean of six between two and ten is said to be arithmetical; six is *the* (arithmetical) mean between these extremes. With this mean there is no place for variation from case to case; it (six) is one and the same (mean) for all (extremes of ten and two); it exceeds two and is exceeded by ten by an equal amount. The concern, then, is for the one position equidistant from the two extremes.

The contrasting mean that Aristotle identifies is one in which the extremes and the intermediate are relative to us (πρὸς ἡμᾶς, 1106a31). This mean is not one nor the same for all (1106a33). Aristotle is supposing that there is some variety of mean positions falling between the 'same' extremes.<sup>11</sup> Instead of being a fixed, arithmetical position, this mean is said to be neither too much nor too little (1106a32-3).

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Aristotle illustrates his point of neither too much nor too little with choosing the right amount of food. As with the arithmetical mean, two and ten are offered as few and many, but here in terms of quantities to be consumed. Here the trainer need not order six (the arithmetical mean). For this would be too little for some, Milo for example, but too much for others, the beginner in athletic exercises for example. And we see the same thing in wrestling and running (1106b5). This mean, then, is not one and the same for all; in the face of the 'same' extremes differences concerning the mean are found, coordinated with differences in the subject and activity.

### IV

Aristotle's illustrations, talk of choices, passions and actions, and what practical wisdom determines should be taken to support circumstance relativity (the first interpretive strategy). The intermediate that one aims at and that manifests itself in passion and action and choice is an intermediate set in terms of the agent's situation. For in seeking the right time, the right feeling, about the right things, towards the right people, in the right way... (1106b21-3), the time, the persons with whom the agent is concerned, their terms of relation, and so on, are critical. It is in relation to these circumstances that the appropriate choice, passion, and action is set. Change the timing, the persons involved, or other features of the situation and what counts as the right feeling or feeling it in the right way is subject to change. It is fair to say, then, that in being relative to us virtue is relative to the agent's circumstances in the determination of the appropriate action, choice, and passion.

And we can understand that Milo's trainer in determining an intermediate amount of food to be consumed must consider the circumstances of Milo's life, the foods available, his next challenger, the time of the competition, and so on. Changes in any of these and what counts as the intermediate amount may vary accordingly. The trainer's practical wisdom must take account of all this.

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So too we should understand Aristotle's thoughts on production (1106b8-15), passion and action (1106b15-29): here too the intermediate is found in relation to its situation, found by practical wisdom.

While all this supports circumstance relativity, it does not repudiate character relativity (the second strategy). For character relativity does not deny that circumstance relativity correctly depicts Aristotle's view, but denies that it does so completely. If so, what reason (if any) is there to suppose that more than a concern for the affect of circumstance upon appropriate activity is to be found in Aristotle's claim?

The present chapter sets out to develop the previous chapter's conclusion that virtue is a state (1106a14-16). Moreover, we are reminded of important features of virtue, and that human virtue makes a human good and do one's work well (1106a15-23). Later we are told that the sort of state we are interested in is a state of character (1106b16). The context of the discussion, then, is one in which Aristotle expresses a concern for the sort of state of character that virtue is -not simply the proportionate nature of choices, actions and passions issuing from and creative of that state of character. This, then, is a general reason to see the force of 'proj h(maj)' as committing Aristotle to a claim about character, not simply the circumstances of choice, action and passion.

Furthermore, Aristotle's characterization of the state that virtue is realizes this concern. As that formal account unfolds (quoted at the outset), Aristotle observes that virtue is a state (of character) that involves choice (ektij proairetikh). But since that alone won't distinguish virtue from other states of character that involve choice (notably vice), Aristotle further distinguishes virtue by noting that the state concerned with choice consists in a mean (eh meso/thti ouksa). But since he has shown that a simple claim of a mean is ambiguous, he notes that this mean state is one that is relative to us (proj h(maj)). Aristotle's claim, then, is that the mean state that virtue is is relative to us, not that the mean state is a state that manifests itself in passions, choices



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and actions which attain the mean in relation to their circumstances. Indeed were Aristotle's point the latter, then we should at least expect the formal account of virtue to make clear that the mean is relative to our circumstances rather than relative to us. But this is not what he does.

Further still, his central example reflects the concern for character. That example concerns choosing the right amount of food for Milo. We have seen that an adequate understanding of that choice entails a relativity to Milo's circumstances. Hence this provides support for the first interpretive strategy. However, this is an implication that we have had to tease out. And it is important to see that Aristotle himself does not point to the circumstances of Milo, but simply mentions Milo - where it seems clear that it is *this* agent, with *his* nature, that makes the difference to what counts as the proportionate choice. Milo is, after all, an extraordinary and well-known figure. Here differences in the mean choice have been coordinated with differences in the subject, where the suggestion seems to be that differences in subjects will make a difference for mean choices, Milo versus others. It is not simply the circumstances or situatedness of the subject that matters. Who we are makes a tremendous difference; and Milo versus the beginner displays this well.

Thus the orientation of the chapter as a whole, the formal account of virtue, the way the relevant qualification is put, and the illustration of the thesis - all these concern the state of character. One feature of the state of character is that it is relative to us, to who we are. These reasons taken together give good grounds for adopting the second interpretative strategy, a strategy which includes the insights of the first, but finds that there is additionally and centrally a concern for character itself, and, in turn, a concern for how the relevant state of character itself helps to determine the right choice, passion and action.

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But if matters are left there, something unsettling about this understanding of Aristotle's position remains. If it counts in favour of the second interpretive strategy (a) that the orientation of Aristotle's discussion is of virtuous character, (b) that his description of that character includes the relative to us qualification, (c) that he features agents (Milo), and (d) that he doesn't speak of relative to our circumstances, then does it not count in favour of the first interpretive strategy that the illustrations offered draw conclusions about mean choices rather than mean states of character? Putting it differently, if Aristotle is interested in states of character with his relative to us claim, why do his illustrations direct themselves to choices, actions and passions, rather than states of character? Hasn't the interpretation offered rendered Aristotle's illustrations misleading?

Clearly misunderstanding is possible, but I don't think that Aristotle, on the suggested understanding, has misled us. We must keep in mind that the phrase 'pro] h(maj' is found not only with the illustrations but within the depiction of virtue itself. This itself should warn us away from supposing that the point is to be restricted to the relevance of circumstances to what is to count as appropriate action, passion and choice.

Of the illustrations themselves, three points need be made. First, on the suggested understanding, the import of 'pro] h(maj' does have to do with choices, passions, and actions in circumstances of virtuous activity both because character relativity allows for circumstance relativity's claims about circumstances, and because character relativity itself mandates differences in mean passion, action and choice due to differences in appropriate character. Thus, that Aristotle speaks of mean choices, passions and actions does not cast doubt that Aristotle is concerned for character relativity nor suggest that Aristotle has put things in a misleading way. Second, if earlier observations about Milo are correct, then while it is true that the illustration concerns choosing a mean amount of food, it is one in which an analog to the

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'character' of the person for whom the choice is made makes all the difference.

'Character' and the nature of the agent, then, have found their way into the illustrations. Third, the fact that the illustrations culminate in mean choices and actions can serve to mislead us only if we fail to recall that throughout book two Aristotle's discussions of choices, actions and passions have provided a relied upon and useful way to reveal the nature and genesis of the state of character that virtue is.

This usefulness runs much deeper than its standard employment. For on Aristotle's philosophical methodology to get at things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things (1104a13-4). Thus we use manifestations of virtuous activity, passion and choice, to help depict features of virtue. Moreover, for Aristotle an interest in states of character is intimately, developmentally and reciprocally connected with the sorts of choices a person of that state makes, the passions she or he feels, the actions she or he takes (cf. 1103a31-b20, 1104a27-b3). Hence talking about choices made (and actions and passions) becomes a natural way for Aristotle to display his point about states of character.

So while mean states of character versus the passions, choices and actions creative of, preservative of, and issuing from them can be confused, and while Aristotle often moves between the two, it should not mislead us, and it is required by his philosophical project. Thus we can safely say that the discussion of consumptions and what the trainer decides, the talk of passions and actions shows us something about mean states of character, and, at the same time, something about consumptions being proportionate (in part) in terms of the situations in which they emerge. Thus his illustrations are not rendered misleading but are what we should expect given Aristotle's philosophical commitments.<sup>12</sup>

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'Proj h(maj' should be read to comment upon not only the situations in which our choices are made, passions are felt, and actions are taken, but also upon our state of character, and, in turn, upon how character itself affects appropriate choice, passion and action. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics* our moral identity is relative to who we are.

To so conclude is but to begin to understand this feature of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. For if these arguments and conclusions are correct, a number of questions become significant, notably: 'Which us does Aristotle have in mind?', 'Given the relevant us, how do the issues of actuality versus potentiality, projects, and non-moral goods play into that account (if at all)?', and also 'Given the relevant us, how is practical wisdom to be understood?' These are not questions to be answered now, but questions that have come to require answering if we are to fully appreciate Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b36-1107a2, based on translations by W.D. Ross, revised by J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson, as found in J.L. Ackrill, ed., *A New Aristotle Reader* (Princeton University Press, 1987), and T. Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Hackett, 1985). Unless otherwise indicated, references are to the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup> J.O. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Basil Blackwell, 1988), 35, emphasis added. R. Kraut seems to take a similar approach in *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton University Press, 1989), note

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22, chapter one – though his references do not include the passage considered here. Throughout, noting that interpreters voice certain strategies will mislead if taken to mean that they have considered the strategies to be articulated here and chosen between them. For, on the whole, the importance of "pro] h[ma]j" is little studied. In choosing the interpretations they have, interpreters have not done so in awareness of (or, at least, not an articulated awareness of) the strategies discussed here.

<sup>3</sup> J.A. Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (Oxford University Press, 1892), I 191, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> The understanding of vice and vices likewise admits of these two approaches, Le., excess and deficiency being relative to circumstances or (also) to character.

<sup>5</sup> R.B. Louden's 'Aristotle's Practical Particularism', *Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1986) 123-38 neatly articulates why on Aristotle's view a theoretical study won't have much to delineate when one reaches the particulars of the situation.

<sup>6</sup> Within the current literature we can see the explicit or implicit adoption of a number of these interpretations. M. Nussbaum in 'Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988) 32-53, seems to offer a version of a species interpretation, though her reflections do not concern "pro] h[ma]j", and her attempt is primarily Aristotelian theory construction rather than exegetical. A. MacIntyre in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Philosophy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) appears to attribute some version of a heroic peer group conception of virtue to Aristotle. H.H. Joachim's remarks in *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1951), 81ff., suggests a view that has certain affinities with an idealized paradigm, on analogy with health.

Any such determination of an 'us' would only be the first step towards understanding how virtue is to be relative to character. The question of ethical identity that this second strategy addresses will prove to be a complex matter. For example, an adequate interpretation of Aristotle (and an adequate philosophical account) must also address the extent to which (and how) the determined 'us' speaks of both the relevant group's potentialities versus actuality, the extent to which (and reason why) what we deem 'non-moral qualities' are relevant or irrelevant to the identity of us, the extent to which personal projects can or cannot be incorporated within the understanding of an 'us: the reasons why, etc. I note but do not pursue these complexities here. At the moment I only mean to determine whether this general strategy is worth pursuing as an understanding of Aristotle.

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, our situations are never the same in all respects. So the condition of this counterfactual is never realized. Still, the use of the counterfactual helpfully reveals differences inherent in the two interpretive strategies.

<sup>8</sup> One has to be a little careful of this generalization over all specifications of the second strategy. Arguably a species version of the second strategy renders other relevant groups inconceivable. If so, then the contrast between the first and second strategy that gives the latter different groups with different means and thereby also different appropriate activities seems to implode.

The philosophical claim that there aren't other relevant species besides our own is reasonably questioned; other relevant species are certainly conceivable. Because of this, the purported diminishment of a contrast between the strategies in this respect is purported only. The interpretive claim that there are not, in fact, other morally relevant species for Aristotle is true to his thinking. However, I take this not to implode the contrast between the two strategies, but to argue that if Aristotle holds to the second strategy, it becomes most implausible to think of him holding a species version of that strategy. Thus I think one can generalize the points just made about 'a mean for me' over the various versions of the second strategy.

<sup>9</sup> By way of a philosophical aside I note that if some version of the second strategy is correct, then Aristotle's doctrine of the mean better suits contemporary intuitions that the differences amongst us help to determine the shape of the virtues and vices we have. As well, Aristotle's doctrine of the mean proves to be much closer to the ancient Chinese doctrine of the mean than is normally assumed.

<sup>10</sup> 'Proj h(maj)' occurs only once in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, outside the present chapter (at 1101b18). Its use there does not help determine our issue. In parallel discussions in the *Eudemian Ethics* (II 3-5) 'proj h(maj)' likewise appears. I would argue that these remarks should be read to accord with the second interpretive strategy (cf. 1222a7-12). But the position of that work is not sufficiently clear to help with our passage; and, in any case, our present concern is the argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Elsewhere there are interesting uses of 'proj h(maj)', particularly as it has to do with the acquisition of knowledge. And while these discussions may be connected to our discussion in important ways, they themselves do not seem to determine our matter. Thus the import of the claim here must be determined on its own, then be related to these other issues.

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<sup>11</sup> Since what here counts as a mean or extreme is relative to us, I speak here of the 'same' extremes.

<sup>12</sup> A final response on behalf of the first interpretive strategy might now deny any real tension between the two strategies. Circumstance relativity would be seen to accommodate the place of character relativity in an understanding of the relative to us qualification through a broad understanding of circumstances: our character, our ethical identity is to be cast as a circumstance of action, choice and passion. Hence there is no real difference between the two strategies, but slightly different ways of saying the same thing.

I suggest that this defense is misguided. It diminishes what is a genuine and plausible alternative (circumstance relativity as so far understood). It does so by wrongly casting one's ethical identity, one's character as a circumstance of one's situation. But one's ethical identity is not a circumstance of the agent, but the agent him or herself. (And with Aristotle's appreciation that character is developed by habituation, few are better positioned to appreciate the differences.) Moreover, even were the notion of circumstance to be given the 'broad understanding,' we should note that the second strategy clarifies matters in identifying and featuring legitimate differences in character as a significant concern of Aristotle's, and in distinguishing how character versus how the situation affects choice, passion and action. In contrast, the first strategy (on a broad understanding) obscures these same matters by indiscriminately lumping character within circumstance of activity.

<sup>13</sup> In 'Relativizing Moral Excellence in Aristotle', *Apeiron* 25 (1992) 49-66, I address the first question and broach the second, presuming, in effect, that the interpretive strategy here defended is correct.

Earlier versions of this paper were read at Christ Church, Oxford University, the University of Texas at Austin, and Queen's University, Kingston; and by R. Bosley, G. Harris, L. Judson, R. Polansky, G. Rubenstein, M. Schofield, 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.