

ARISTOTLE ON BECOMING HUMAN

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Abstract

The essay focuses on Aristotle's reflections on the human being—on humanity not as given, but in fact always to come, understood as a task. I highlight the constructive work involved in becoming human and show that, far from construction in its merely techno-mechanical character, at stake is a formative process vastly proceeding in the dark, lacking eidetically clear guidelines. Indeed, it is through such a process, through such a groping, that eidetic clarification, if at all possible, may be accomplished. In the examination of the extraordinary artifact that the human being is, I discuss matters pertaining to the indemonstrability of first principles; the architectonic character of ethics and its fundamental function vis-à-vis all other human endeavors, including the scientific disciplines (ethics as first philosophy); the relation between human constitution and nature; and issues of freedom, self-making, and self-overcoming.

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Resumen

Este ensayo se enfoca en las reflexiones de Aristóteles sobre el ser humano - sobre la humanidad no como algo dado, sino como un hecho en devenir, entendido como una tarea. Resalto el trabajo constructivo involucrado en el proceso de llegar a hacerse humano, y muestro que, lejos de una construcción en su carácter meramente técnico-mecánico, está en juego un proceso formativo que en buena medida se desenvuelve en la oscuridad y carece de guías eidéticas claras. En efecto, es a través de dicho proceso, de semejante tanteo en la oscuridad, como se puede llegar a obtener, si es que esto es posible, claridad eidética. En el análisis del extraordinario artefacto que es el ser humano, discuto cuestiones relativas a la indemostrabilidad de los primeros principios, el carácter arquitectónico de la ética y su función fundamental respecto a las demás empresas humanas incluyendo las disciplinas científicas (la ética como filosofía primera), la relación entre constitución humana y naturaleza, y problemas sobre la libertad, la autorrealización y la autosuperación.

Palabras clave: Aristóteles, ética, libertad, autorrealización, autosuperación.

1 Prologue

What follows is a reflection on humanity. On humanity not given, indeed, always to come: humanity as a task. In the wake of Aristotle’s elaborations, I will be focusing on the constructive work involved in becoming human and on the overcoming of construction in its merely techno-mechanical and static character. The two moments are equally essential to an understanding of the human phenomenon. Construction should therefore be understood as dynamically ongoing, contemplating plasticity and transformation. The human being announces itself as no ordinary artifact.¹

In an Aristotelian perspective, ethics is philosophy in the most encompassing sense, for its outlook crucially shapes the entire range of human enactment. Indeed, as we read in the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethics comprehends all human endeavors, including intellectual pursuits. The question of the human construct, then, is no merely local issue, regarding ethics as a marginal and clearly circumscribed discipline. To be sure, ethical reflection is crucially concerned with the construction of the human. It is, therefore, the privileged *locus* of an extraordinarily rich meditation on habit and ethical formation, situating the issue at the heart of the investigation of being human. However, the all-encompassing character of such a concern clearly reveals ethics as no philosophical discipline among others. In its comprehensive political scope, ethics is the most architectonic of disciplines, for it at once

¹For a sustained discussion of what here can only be the statement of a point of departure, I refer to my *Aristotle’s Ethics as First Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008).

regards a project, entails a building, and, through its determinations, shapes, inflects, and orients all other disciplines—to the point of deciding on their functions and urgency (or lack thereof). This is perhaps why the central question in the ethico-political meditation, the question of habit, traverses the Aristotelian *corpus* to the point of resulting nearly ubiquitous, signaling the ethical underpinnings of scientific, logical, physical as well as metaphysical inquiries.

Habit can preliminarily be outlined as a kind of prosthesis, as a stratification or layering added onto the work of nature.² The human being is the living being by nature left open-ended, incomplete, that is, not mechanistically determined by nature, irreducible to natural causation. Beyond its physical and physiological determinations, it presents an unfathomable potentiality whose actualization is not governed by nature, i.e., not a dictated automatism—a potentiality to be explored in the silence of nature. The acquisition of habit through repetition probes into human potentiality and configures it in progressively stabilized actualizations.

We are also alerted by the Aristotelian announcement that the human is by nature political. The work of habituation is carried out with others and in virtue of being and communing with others. Cultural formations and institutions are communal habits. Within this framework individual formation unfolds and is directed. In fact, habituation is crucially the acquisition of structure from the surroundings and is unthinkable aside from political belonging. And yet, albeit not an endogenous process, the acquisition of habits remains irreducible to conformism, adher-

²*Nicomachean Ethics* Gamma 1115a1.

ence to convention, mere imitation, i.e., to the thoughtlessness and mechanicity of blindly applied protocols.

The study of ethics precisely illuminates the above issues. Habit emerges as the necessary supplementation of nature, for nature has left the human underdetermined. The human does not *have* all she needs to have: preferences, forms of action, customs... all of them need to be chosen and stabilized. Habit may therefore be understood as the acquisition of a having, the configuration that comes to clothe the body of desire and instinct—the shape in and as which the drives come to manifest themselves and abide. It is *habitus* and *habitat*.³ Crucially, furthermore, the ethical reflection involves the becoming conscious of such an acquisition, the analytical practice casting light on one’s own formative process: and becoming conscious of one’s own formation allows for the possibility of transformation, for the self-recreation and the concomitant deconstruction of what was constructed, which unveil the genuinely fertile aspect of becoming. Needless to say, the possibility of change that we catch a glimpse of in this way, is and is not up to us. As we shall see, it is never simply a matter of willing oneself this way or the other. Orienting one’s life, setting oneself to work, enacting oneself in a certain (ever unique) way is no technological matter.

In the margins of these introductory considerations it should be recalled that, according to Aristotle, *logos* itself

³As character structure, the habits designate the place of one life, one’s *habitat*, one’s dwelling in the cosmos. In archaic usage, e.g., in Homer, *ethos* designates the place in which a particular animal belongs, where others of the same kind gather and thrive (horses, for instance, as in *Iliad* VI.511). Belonging somewhere, then, means to find there the possibility of flourishing, the most appropriate conditions to unfold and become whatever a being happens to be.

is crucially a matter of habit. As *Nicomachean Ethics* Alpha and Beta lucidly warn, the having of *logos* is no natural endowment but comes into being through cultivation. The excellent habits that pertain to the having of *logos* or, more precisely, constitute the actualization, articulation, and flowering of *logos* as such, “for the most part” have their “origin and growth” in “teaching” and therefore demand “experience and time” (1103a14-17). There is no activation of the capacities that *logos* names without the relation of education, indeed, without relation *tout court*. There is no speech, no acquisition of language (which is always acquisition of *a* language), without taking in the other who is always already speaking to me, before me. But similar views are disseminated in apparently very distant treatises as well. We should at least mention *Posterior Analytics* Beta, in which the formation of universals and, subsequently, of principles, is said to be based on the layering of repeated experiences and fundamentally to involve sensibility (99b15-100b17). In this context Aristotle explicitly characterizes such stratifications as “habits” (100a10) and, furthermore, speaks of “knowing” (*gnorizein*) (99b19) and “thinking” (*dianoia*) (100b5) as habits.

Even in the *Metaphysics*, most notably in the treatise alpha elatton, we are told that thinking is a habit—a having that comes to be possessed thanks to communal exchange, to the shared participation in the “contemplation of truth” and in the concomitant discussions (993a30-b19). The very possibility of thinking, in other words, is predicated upon a community of inquiry whose ongoing discourses are handed down and inherited, drawing variously intertwined lineages. The entirety of this treatise constitutes a meditation on the always singular geo-

historical conditions of such a choral pursuit and its temporal propagation.

This perspective allows Aristotle to see cultural sedimentations as structurally analogous to individual formation, and to envision, as he does in *Metaphysics* Lambda with a vertiginous gesture, entire civilizations in their historicity and finitude. Highly refined cultures and civilizations are divined in their dawning and decaying (“probably every art and every philosophy has often reached a stage of development as far as it could and then again has perished”), nearly irretrievable as they dissipate in the depth of time, perhaps leaving only few inscrutable fragments in their wake, “saved like relics up to now” and “evident to us only to this extent” (1074b10-14).⁴

2 On Becoming Human

The human, then, is always yet to come. This much is implied in the understanding of humanity as a task. One is born, and this is no gift, but the assignment of a work. It is not the case that we *start from* the human being as given, already constituted and self-evident, *and then subsequently* wonder about the orientation of our life. The perspicuous constitution of the human is a late fruit—if it ever comes to

⁴Here and throughout the present essay the translations of passages from the Aristotelian *corpus* are mine, although I have fruitfully consulted, and not infrequently followed, Hippocrates G. Apostle’s translations whenever available. The following translations by Apostle were published by The Peripatetic Press (Grinnell, Iowa) in the year indicated in parenthesis: *Metaphysics* (1979), *Nicomachean Ethics* (1975), *Posterior Analytics* (1981), *Politics* (with Lloyd P. Gerson, 1986). The translations below, from Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Plato’s *Republic* are likewise mine.

be. I enter the scene of this life and am already late with respect to its inauguration. Clarifying for myself the course I am to follow, and thereby shaping myself, is at one with laying myself bare in my being. Ethics properly starts with the problem of the human (the *human as a problem*) and undertakes the formation thereof—at once the making, directing, and revealing of it. The task of discovery is crucially, if not exclusively, a matter of construction. Ethics is the architecture of the human.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* opens with the statement: “Every art and every inquiry, every action and every intention is thought to aim at a certain good; hence human beings have expressed themselves well in declaring the good to be that at which all things aim” (1094a1-3). Any and all activities oriented to bringing forth (*tekhnê*), as well as all manners of investigation (*methodos*), action in the broadest sense (*praxis*), and the blend of inclination and discerning choice which sustains action (*proairesis*) appear to human beings to tend to the good, *however this should be understood*. Indeed, human beings recognize the good as that which orients human endeavor in all its modes.

What is here brought to our attention is the peculiar and disquieting ingenuity allotted to human beings. Their multifarious entrepreneurship includes investigations as well as actions and interventions that can drastically reshape the earthly environment. The human ability radically to alter their environment between earth and sky, to harness or intervene in *phusis*, ultimately to bring forth from non-being into being, bespeaks a resourcefulness arresting in its terribleness, because potentially both fecund and destructive, yet in itself utterly indifferent to its orientation towards realization or affliction. In the backdrop of

the lines opening the *Nicomachean Ethics* we hear the celebrated words of the chorus in Sophocles’ *Antigone*: “*Pollata deina*, many are the uncanny things, *kouden anthropou deinoteron pelei*, but none is uncannier than the human being... *pantoporos*, all-resourceful, *aporos ep’ouden*, resourceless before nothing, he rushes towards what must come. From death alone he will not escape...” (332-360). *Deinos*, grievously prodigious, is indeed the human being,⁵ in its quest for domination and plunder, as it roams the seas, curbs the elements, and wearies the earth. Its relentlessness is disturbing, the range and variety of its powers disorienting.

From within the single disciplines or practices one cannot retrieve indications regarding how one is to guide human ventures. And yet, whether, how, and in what direction such ventures unfold is not a matter of indifference. On the contrary, this circumstance engenders the utmost perplexity. The philosophical insight in this regard reveals that the human being, no less than other living

⁵*Deinos* designates what is terrifying and fearful in its strangeness, the concomitance of the wondrous and the monstrous, of portent and violence. Struggling to bring this untranslatable term into his own idiom, Hölderlin renders it first as *gewaltig* and then as *ungeheuer* (Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by F. Beissner and Adolf Beck [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1943-1985], 5: 42, 219). Heidegger translates it as *unheimlich* (Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, Gesamtausgabe 40 [Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983], 146-87, and *Hölderlins Hymne Der Ister*, Gesamtausgabe 53 [Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1984]), echoing Freud’s elaboration of *das Unheimliche* in its disquieting resonance. Freud’s essay “Das Unheimliche” was first published in 1919 (*Imago* 5: 297-324), but the term already appeared in earlier writings (“Über Deckerinnerungen” [1899], “Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten” [1905], “Totem und Tabu” [1912-13], “Das Tabu der Virginität” [1917]).

beings, pre-reflectively aims at self-realization, thrives in growing into what it was to be, desires to come into itself, into its own outline and definiteness. Far from simply discharging its own energies haphazardly, dissipating itself following blind impulsivity, remaining at the stage of nebulous involution, the human being finds ineffable pleasure in delimiting itself, finding equilibrium, measure, and configuration. This it means to become oneself, to grow out of indeterminacy and (con)fusion. Ethical reflection, focusing on no narrowly construed issue, but rather on human experience and enveloping circumstances, fosters the awareness necessary to bringing life into sharper focus, allowing for being more fully there, perceptively open to the surroundings, more able to respond and navigate across the ongoing play of cosmic implication. In this way, ethical reflection addresses the pre-reflective desire for self-attainment, which involves at once self-delimitation and the contemplation of belonging in infinitely vast dynamics.

Only a concern with that which exceeds the single discipline, contemplates all manners of undertaking, and constitutes the common aim, can provide such directions. *To deinotaton*, the being that is the uncanniest of all uncanny beings, must be contained, brought within the compass of an orientation to the good, such that not only habitual structures may be formed, but excellent ones—structures that are good, in fact, most desirable *for it*. Quite punctually, then, the trajectory of Aristotle’s ethical discussion will lead to the inscription of *deinotes* (the unbound shrewdness of the *deinos*) within *phronesis*, within the orientation to the good that *phronesis* indicates. Said to be “a habit with true reason [*hexin alethe meta lo-*

gou] and an ability for actions concerning what is good or bad for human beings” (1140b6-7), *phronesis* involves incisive effectiveness in assessing circumstances, so as to act in the most conducive way. *Phronesis* involves the “power” of *deinotes* (1144a24). However, left alone, *deinotes* is mere sense of opportunity, the merely instrumental efficiency pursuing an end by any means whatsoever, indifferently (1144a26-28). Just as in the Sophoclean chorus *to deinotaton* is unlimited and all-resourceful (*pantoporon*), in the Aristotelian text *deinotes* designates the ineradicable possibility of unscrupulousness, the posture that excludes no option and in fact keeps all options open, contemplating all courses of action (*panourgia* [1144a27]). In *phronesis*, then, we observe the cleverness and lucidity of *deinotes* brought into a comprehensive and guiding desire for the good. *Phronesis* is shrewdness, *deinotes*, with a vision: it “is not” the same as “the power” of shrewdness, “but neither can it be without this power. And this habit [i.e., prudence] develops by means of this eye of the soul [*toi ommati toutoi ginetai tes psukhes*], but not without virtue” (1144a28-30). At stake is bringing the boundless resourcefulness and exuberance to a halt, that is, bringing measure to bear on the measureless.

Again, it is not a matter of *imposing measure on* the human, but rather of *drawing the measure from* the human, *out of* the human, making explicit what is implicit in the human. In other words, it is not a matter of an arbitrary gesture. The human itself exhibits a desire for coming into its proper limit, whatever this may be—and, in fact, at issue is precisely the clarification, however inceptive, of the limit(s) that the human appears to be always already desirous of and stretching towards:

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Now if of things we do there is an end which we wish for its own sake whereas the other things we wish for the sake of this end, and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for in this manner the process will go on to infinity and our desire will be empty and vain), then clearly this end would be the good and the highest good [*to ariston*]. (1094a19-23)

It is our own being, the phenomenology of our experience and actions, that show *the fact* of limit, the denial of infinite regress.⁶ Much as such a fact may not be clear to us in its whatness, still, it imposes itself on us with its strange indisputability.⁷

3 Architecture

Ethics is said to be an “architectonic” “science” or “power” (1094a27-28), for it embraces and crucially configures the whole range of human initiative. In this sense, it is said to be politics. But what does ethics set out to do? And what orients it? Ethics sets out to determine “what human beings should do and what they should abstain from doing” (1094b6). In order to so, it must be guided by a knowledge of the good in its whatness. Yet, the good is assumed from the start without any further argumentation, let alone definition: *that* the good is that at which all

⁶On the structural association of the good and final causality, i.e., delimitation, coming to an end, avoiding the ruinous vanity of infinite regress, see *Metaphysics* alpha elatton 994b9-31.

⁷“[F]or all human beings always act in order to attain what they think to be good” (*Politics* 1252a3-4).

human enactment aims is accepted on the ground of our experience, and the ethical meditation should therefore undertake “to grasp, in outline at least” (1094a26), *what* the good is.⁸ Ethics should cast light on the good in order to guide and shape human becoming. At the same time, whatever insight may be obtained regarding the good comes to be outlined through the analysis (which is at once a shaping) of human becoming. We draw from experience what should inform experience. The circularity is evident here. Let us follow Aristotle closely in this opening stipulation:

Will not the knowledge of it [the highest good], then, have a great influence on our way of life, and would we not [as a consequence] be more likely to attain the desired end, like archers who have a mark to aim at? If so, then we should try to grasp, in outline at least, what that end is and to which of the sciences or faculties it belongs. It would seem to belong to the one which is most authoritative and most architectonic. Now politics appears to be such;

⁸Consider the strange overlapping of ethics and first philosophy, clearly emerging from the formulation of their respective lines of research. In *Metaphysics* Alpha Aristotle states that “the supreme science [*arkhikotatē*], and superior [*arkhikē*] to any subordinate science, is the one which knows that for the sake of which each thing must be done, and this is the good in each case, and, in general, the highest good [*to ariston*] in the whole of nature” (982b4-8). And in the *Politics*, again: “in every science and every art the end [aimed at] is a good; and the supreme [*megiston*] good and the good in the highest degree [*malista*] depends on the most authoritative power, which is politics. The political good is that which is just, this being that which is of common benefit” (1282b14-19).

for it is this which regulates what sciences are needed in a state and what kind of sciences should be learned by each [kind of individuals] and to what extent. The most honored faculties, too, e.g., strategy and economics and rhetoric, are observed to come under this [faculty]. And since this faculty uses the rest of the [practical]⁹ sciences and also legislates what human beings should do and what they should abstain from doing, its end would include the ends of the other faculties; hence this is the end which would be the good for humankind. For even if this end be the same for an individual as for the *polis*, nevertheless the end of the *polis* appears to be greater and more complete to attain and to preserve; for though this end is dear also to a single individual, it appears to be more noble and more divine to a race of human beings or to a *polis*. (1144a23-b10)

The ethical reflection is “architectonic,” not only in the sense of all-encompassing, but decisively in the sense that it is involved in *building* human comportment, in shaping and structuring the ways of human living together. It determines what humans are to do, what they are to study. We could say that it is a mode of *tekhnê*, indeed, *tekhnê* in its most originary sense: ethical reflection envisions and brings forth human shapes and shapes of human community. The relation between this “science” or “faculty” that is architectonic, primordially formative and creative,

⁹*Praktikais* elided in Bywater’s edition (Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. Ingram Bywater [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1891]).

and the other arts or sciences is analogous to that between the architect, i.e., the master artist, the one who designs and devises, and the other builders or workmen, those who execute the ideation of the architect.¹⁰ Indeed, in configuring the human, whether in terms of character, *ethos*, or in terms of the outward shape of a *polis*, politics also rules over the domain of scientific practices, determining its very structures, priorities, and propriety. The single sciences, then, do not enjoy some kind of autonomous status. They are ultimately not ends in themselves, but are evaluated according to the exigencies of the community, that is, subjected to a more overarching order of finality. In practical thinking comprehensively understood we discern no mere art, but an architectonics, no *tekhnê* among others, but the *tekhnê* ruling over others.

But what kind of *tekhnê* would this be? Certainly not the kind having to do with looking at the eidetic model and reproducing it in the sublunar realm.¹¹ Aristotle meticulously signals the imprecision of the discourse of ethics and the concomitant dimness of the principle. The guiding principle remains elusive, escapes the *logos*. It does so essentially:

Our inquiry [*methodos*], then, has as its aim these ends, and it is a certain political inquiry; and it would be adequately discussed if it is presented as clearly as is proper to its subject matter [*hupokeimenen*]; for, as in hand made

¹⁰See, paradigmatically, *Metaphysics* Alpha 981a12-982a3.

¹¹On the related questions of *tekhnê*, ethical construction, and self-fashioning, see my "Three Fragments on *Tekhnê* in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: A Note on Exploration and Creativity," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 32.1 (2011), 103-125.

articles, precision [*to... akribes*] should not be sought for alike in all discussions [*logois*]. Beautiful and just things, with which politics is concerned, have so many differences and fluctuations [*diaphoran kai planen*] that they appear to be only by custom [*nomoi*] and not by nature. Good things, too, have such fluctuations because harm has come from them to many individuals; for some human beings even perished because of wealth, others because of bravery. So in discussing such matters and in using [premises] concerning them, we should be content to indicate the truth roughly and in outline [*pakhulos kai tupoi*], and when we deal with things which occur for the most part and use similar [premises] for them, [we should be content to draw] conclusions of a similar nature. The listener, too, should accept each of these statements in the same manner; for it is the mark of an educated human being to seek as much precision in things of a given genus as their nature allows, for to accept persuasive arguments from a mathematician appears to be [as inappropriate as] to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician. (1094b12-28)

We should note the caution marking the statement that ethico-political determinations may be a matter of convention, of *nomos*, and not by nature, *phusei*. Aristotle does not say that they *are* according to *nomos*, but that they *appear* or *are thought to be* so. At the outset we are confronted with the silence of nature, or what seems to be such. Nature seems to leave us alone, not to prescribe fully our trajec-

tory. No complete guidance is perceptible. Such a circumstance motivates, at least provisionally, the characterization of ethics in terms of custom and convention. This initial claim will, in a sense, find confirmation throughout the treatise. In another sense, however, Aristotle will complicate it by frequently intimating the irreducibility of ethical structures to the order of mere arbitrariness. In the course of the treatise, as we shall see, Aristotle will progressively emphasize the “natural” stratum of human comportment, its irreducibility to conformity to cultural codifications.

It is likewise crucial to underline that the acceptance of what is here proposed, namely that only a qualified accuracy is to be expected of the discourse at hand, rests on the assumption that the interlocutors or listeners have already received the proper education, *paideia*. This is the condition for the acceptance of the premises as such, the condition *before* the premises, *prior to* and *outside* the entire discourse.¹² It is only those who already possess a certain degree of maturity that will be able to stop at the principle without asking for further reasons—which would be inappropriate. Education, then, means knowing when to stop in the inquiry concerning the causes, when to recognize something as a principle, that is, needing no further causes, and accordingly acknowledge it as a premise regardless of its demonstrability. In this sense, education signifies not so much or not simply formal learning,

¹²On the traits of someone “educated,” see *On the Parts of Animals* 639a1-15, *Politics* 1282a1-12, and *Metaphysics* 1005b3-5, 1006a5-9. Especially in the latter context, having the adequate prerequisites is connected with the ability to decide regarding the appropriateness of demonstration. Those opportunely educated can halt the infinite flight to ever preceding causes and rest in the acceptance of first (indemonstrable) principles.

but character formation, formation of the human being as such. Thus understood, education is necessary for discourse to make a start at all—daring to begin, even inexplicably. It indicates the ability to seize necessity even in its silence, to acknowledge evidence in its compelling character: being compelled and determined beyond demonstration.

Aristotle repeatedly returns to these points, granting them ample articulation. Speaking of the strategy of his *logos*, he says:

... perhaps we should first make a sketch and later fill in the details. When an outline has been beautifully made, it would seem that anyone could go forward and articulate the parts, for time is a good discoverer and cooperator [*sunergos*] in such matters. It is in this way that the arts advanced, for anyone can add what is lacking. We should also recall what has been stated previously: precision should not be sought alike in all cases, but in each case only as much as the subject matter [*hupokeimenen hulen*] allows and as much as is proper to the inquiry. Thus a carpenter [*tekton*] and a geometer [*geometres*] make inquiries concerning the right angle in different ways; for the first does it as much as it is useful to his work, while the second inquires what it is or what kind of thing it is, since his aim is to contemplate the truth. We should proceed likewise in other situations and not allow side lines [*parerga*] to dominate the main task [*ergon*]. Again, we should not demand the cause in all things alike, but in

some cases it is sufficient to indicate the fact [*to hoti*] beautifully, as is also the case with principles; and the fact is first and is a principle. Now some principles are contemplated [*theorountai*] by induction, others by sensation, others by some kind of habituation [*ethismoi*], and others in some other way. So we should try to present each according to its own nature and should make a serious effort to describe [*dioristhosi*] them beautifully, for they have a great influence on what follows; for a principle is thought to be more than half of the whole, and through it many of the things sought become apparent [*sumphane*] also. (1098a22-b8)

Aristotle calls for a schematic outline to begin with, which may allow for subsequent integrations.¹³ Again, a comparison with artistic procedures corroborates this position. The arts “advanced” in this way, says Aristotle—from rather approximate beginnings, maturing and growing with time. In ethics as well we are more like carpenters: carrying out the work of building, at once adhering to ever singular material conditions and exhibiting the characteristic imprecision. As imprecise as carpenters, we are doing the work of architects and drawing the broad lineaments of ethical reflection.

Of course, the process of beginning with “a sketch” and then filling in “the details” may not necessarily yield the desired outcome. This becomes paradigmatically evident in the elaboration of the schematic partitioning of the soul (above all in terms of rationality and irrational-

¹³See also *Topics* 101a19-24.

ity, having or not having *logos*).¹⁴ Here, however, Aristotle limits himself to insisting on the correlation between precision and the demands imposed by the matter at stake on the related inquiry. It is the “subject matter,” the “thing itself,” the “fact” (*to hoti*) that informs the discourse and surfaces through it. Aristotle seems to be gesturing towards what could be called an “*ethos* of inquiry” — a sensitivity, on part of the one who speaks, to the particular, to the singular circumstance and the requirements of the theme examined. Such a sensitivity will also be shown as characterizing all deliberation that informs action. There is no absolute and all-encompassing set of criteria regulating the inquiring posture and discourse: these find in their own “underlying matter” decisive guidance.

Aristotle almost redundantly emphasizes the importance of “describing” the fact well, “beautifully.” Concerning practical affairs and, more broadly, first principles, it is inane, altogether inappropriate, to ask for the cause *ad infinitum*: in the case of principles, because they are the uncaused causes; in the case of a fact, because the *that* of a given situation is “first and a principle” and as such involves no further “why.” It should be apprehended in the

¹⁴Seemingly unproblematic at first, as the psycho-noetic analysis proceeds the schematizations of the *psukhe* are revealed as increasingly inconsistent. To appreciate the extent of such a problematization, compare the threefold subdivision outlined in *Nicomachean Ethics* Alpha (metabolic life, life of affects and appetites, life with *logos*) to the developments leading to Zeta, where the language of “parts” becomes most perplexing, the distinction between ethical and intellectual virtues emerges in its complexity (particularly in *phronesis*), and even the having of *logos* seems enigmatic, no longer clear (particularly in light of *nous* and its irreducibility to *logos*, *sullogismos*, demonstration, discursive temporality).

experience of evidence and, accordingly, compel assent. This implies that *logos* cannot fully fathom principles, least of all those principles that are practical matters. It can, at most, describe them, assume them through definition. First principles and ultimate particulars constitute the extreme terms delimiting the field of thinking and the properly scientific procedures. They are the noetic perceptions both exceeding and conditioning the scientific discourses, including geometry and the "theoretical sciences" overall. But the prominence of the descriptive practice bespeaks the primacy of dialectical or even rhetorical practices in grounding the sciences, and hence the primordially of the ethical dimension vis-à-vis the scientific procedures. Only on the ground of premises thus accepted may the sciences proceed to prove and demonstrate.

As for ethics itself, Aristotle's affirmation that "the fact is first and is a principle" signals, again, that the ethical discourse recognizes and seeks to clarify the ground on which it rests: a dynamic ground, in fact shifting and mobile, because intuitively constituted and demanding ongoing reaffirmation. Ethics is, then, about establishing principles, i.e., by describing facts and allowing them to become manifest, luminous (*sumphanes*). Ethics is not absolutely precise, precisely as it undertakes to account for principles "beautifully" and adhere to the multiplicity and fluctuation of phenomena. And it is according to their beauty and appropriateness that descriptions disclose or conceal, indeed both illumine and obscure. Indeed, a principle "is thought" or "appears" to be "more than half of the whole." Even before proceeding from principles, ethics takes up the task of leading to principles, assess-

ing and formulating them.¹⁵ It is, then, genuine “science of principles,” with all the peculiarities implicit in such a phrase, above all its concern with what “is first” and its non-demonstrative tenor. Characteristically at stake in the ethical discourse is finding principles *in* the familiar, starting from the familiar in order to dig out what is folded there.

Aristotle returns to the question of precision in treatise Beta, radically emphasizing his preoccupation with method, as if to signal that such considerations, far from mere *parerga* and marginal annotations, lie at the very heart of this investigation. Aristotle seems to begin anew:

But first, let us agree on that matter, namely, that all statements concerning matters of action should be made sketchily [*tupoi*] and not with precision, for, as we said at the beginning, our demands of statements should be in accordance with the subject matter [*hulen*] of those statements; in matters concerning action and expediency, and in those of health, there is no uniformity. And if such is the statement according to the whole [*katholou logou*], a statement concerning particulars will be even less precise; for these do not fall under any art [*tekhnē*] or precept [*parangelian*], but those who are to act must always examine what pertains to the occasion [*ta pros ton kairon*], as in medical art and navigation [*kubernētikēs*]. Yet even though our present statement is of such

¹⁵Aristotle attributes to Plato the distinction between *logoi* “from principles” and “leading to principles” (1095a31-b2).

a nature, we should try to be of some help.
(1104a1-11)

The present statement, thus, is most imprecise, for the matter, the *hule* of ethics (i.e., life itself in its becoming) lacks uniformity. Aristotle also formulates a further distinction, between, on the one hand, the *logoi* of ethics (i.e., statements according to the whole, *katholou*, which frame the field and questions of ethics) and, on the other hand, the *logoi* regarding each particular situation (i.e., considerations bound to be least precise of all, let alone predictable, because pertaining to elusive, singular, and fleeting circumstances). There is no statement able unqualifiedly to adhere to the situation in motion and adequately to account for human dwelling in the *kairos*. Consequently, there is no artful technique, *tekhnê*, able to provide a prescriptive ethical code *stricto sensu*. For the directions for action are to be found, essentially if not exclusively, in the circumstances and in the intuitive-practical ability to evaluate them. Ethical reflection, thus, would provide the intellectual analyses and clarifications propaedeutic to a more skillful encounter with what is the case, but could in no way replace practical upbringing (the formation of character) and the intuitive assessment of each singular circumstance—of *this* body to be cured, of the course to be taken in the midst of *these* currents, under *this* sky. A priori and for altogether essential reasons, ethics cannot be prescriptive, precisely because it cannot embrace all possible circumstances and have in sight the infinite fecundity of time.

If anything, the ethical treatises may offer “navigational instruments,” give instruction, contribute to establish the needed posture to steer “beautifully” through the

often raging waters of life.¹⁶ For what is at stake in living is, as Aristotle notes echoing Calypso’s recommendation to Odysseus, to “keep the ship away from the surf and spray” (1109a2).¹⁷ The excellent habits (*aretai*), these acquired attitudes, these dispositions that one has come to “possess” (*ekhein*) as one’s own *habitus* and *habitat* (*hexis*), which are proper to one in the sense that they constitute one’s intimate constellation—are formed through repeated exercise and there is no discursive shortcut to them. It is this practical substratum that furnishes determinant, indispensable orientation in action.

Imprecision, then, may not be seen as an imperfection. As the treatise will progressively emphasize, it is *logos* that, when alienated from being, represents a problem. For abstraction is coarse, its schemata unjust (unable to do justice) to the infinitely diverse taking place of life.¹⁸ Ethics is imprecise “concerning particulars” just as any other science is. But, unlike the others, ethics dwells on it and makes it explicit. Here lies the peculiar comprehensiveness of ethics. It understands that it is imprecise of *necessity*, because what is at stake, as in navigation, is to act according to the *kairos*—according to *this* spatio-temporal configuration, to the distinctive demand (propriety) of *this* moment and place. Ethics broadens the spectrum of atten-

¹⁶One is reminded of the Platonic simile of the city and the ship (*Republic* 488a-489c) as well as the image of the human condition as a “prodigious river” within which human beings are swept about (*Timaeus* 43a-c).

¹⁷*Odyssey* XII.219.

¹⁸The problem of abstraction is also and above all a matter of injustice. It points to the irreducibility of justice to juridical formulas, to *logoi* universal and unqualified (*Nicomachean Ethics* Epsilon 1137b12-33).

tion to include all that may concern anyone in any circumstance, but no discourse could adequately circumscribe such a range. Precisely because imprecise and grounded in world and experience as a whole, without exclusions or abstractions, ethics is first philosophy—architectonic and encompassing. It emerges as a study of the being and making of the human, definitely other than a prescriptive repertoire.

4 *Autopoiesis*

It seems that we cannot speak here of *tekhnê* according to the model laid out (at least inceptively) in Plato’s *Timaeus*. The Platonic demiurge brings forth the *cosmos* through the contemplation and imitation of an eidetic object, which would subsist in its integrity prior to and separate from the unfolding of the productive effort. But ethics is not poietic in this sense, for it has no prior, uncontroversial idea of that which it sets out to bring about (the paradigm of human accomplishment) and, therefore, no given guidance. Ethics rather strives to elucidate such an idea, while always already underway.

And yet, Aristotle repeatedly turns to the language of *tekhnê* and *poiesis* to characterize the ethico-political discourse and human action. “For we posited the end of politics to be the highest good, and politics takes the greatest care in making the citizens of a certain quality, i.e., good and disposed to beautiful actions” (1099b30-32). The politician or lawgiver is described as an *arkhitekton*, a master *tekhnites*: “The true statesman, too, is thought to have made the greatest effort in studying excellence, for his wish is to make the citizens good and obedient to the

laws” (1102a7-10). The lawgiver aims at such an intervention in the human surroundings: taking things up, reshaping and reorienting them. Of course, this can be done more or less skillfully, or even disastrously: “For it is by making citizens acquire certain habits that legislators make them good, and this is what every legislator wishes. But legislators who do not do this well are making a mistake; and good government differs from bad government in this respect” (1103b4-6). It is likewise clear, and of the utmost importance, that the end in view is anything but an acquiescent citizen, easily manipulated and passively molded by the rules. This would be, at best, a distorted interpretation of the ethico-political task. The “architectonic” and creative character of lawmaking does not automatically translate into the mastery of the ruler over the ruled, let alone of knowledge over action. As Aristotle notes in the *Politics*, ultimately the one who can authoritatively assess something produced (and hence guide further making) is not the maker, but the user (1282a20-24). It is the choral knowledge of those for the sake of which something is made (an awareness arising from their experience, refined through time and intimate frequentation) which alone can (re)orient the making.¹⁹ If the fecundity of the lawmaker is the ability to produce laws and other instruments for “navigation,” it is the “user,” in this case the one who navigates, i.e., lives, who “knows” what allows him or her to do so well.

Aristotle’s insistence on the productive function of the ethico-political investigation calls for a re-thinking of *poiesis*, of *tekhnê* itself, well beyond the model of production based on eidetic contemplation. It demands an under-

¹⁹See also Plato’s *Republic* X 601b-602a.

standing of production based on measures and demands internal to that which is produced, or to those for the sake of which the production is carried out—internal to the systemic constellation of human experience in its worldly exchanges and interactions. Ethics, therefore, may be acknowledged as indeed productive, but this casts a quite unusual light on production. Far from grounded on the immutable clarity of the eidetic paradigm, artful production is revealed as rooted in a twofold difficulty: on one hand, it rests on a grounding principle necessary and yet not fully available; on the other hand, it must proceed somewhat in the dark and, thus groping, elucidate the elusive principle, clarify it, draw it out of obscurity. In this sense, production, ethics itself as productive, presents itself less as *methodos* than as *hodos*—as that manner of intervention that, venturing to bring forth that which, by definition, is not yet the case, but only a vision thus far undetermined, draws its path for the first time. The bringing forth that ethics names is architecture without geometry. We already evoked the Aristotelian figure of the carpenter building without the geometer’s plan.²⁰

²⁰Far from reducing politics to *tekhnê*, in the unfolding of the discourse on politics Aristotle shows *tekhnê* as a *poiein* that is no mere presupposition and copying of an eidetic original. The making here at stake is a making without and prior to a paradigm. At the limit, it is the making of the paradigm itself. *Tekhnê* technologically understood, as eidetic contemplation, ideality, and ideology imposed on the political domain, is clearly at odds with the thrust of Aristotle’s thinking. But *tekhnê* thus construed is already a myth in Plato himself. For brevity, consider *Republic* II, where the building of the city is ventured in the absence of any accessible paradigm. Such a construction is inaugurated precisely because of the essential impossibility of contemplation of the *eidos* (of justice) and is, therefore, a groping in the dark. The interlocutors produce an *eidolon* in order to make up for the *eidos* that

It would be relevant to follow the question of bringing forth as it traverses the entire ethico-political discussion, paradigmatically in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Such a trajectory would initiate with the architecture of the human (habituation, coming into a measure and definiteness, dressing of the body of desires) as a thrust beyond nature—beyond nature as mechanism and mechanical determination. As we saw above, this is Aristotle’s inaugural step, where he cautiously observes that ethical matters “are held to be only by custom and not by nature” (1094b16-17). We would, then, go on to notice Aristotle’s movement beyond custom itself—beyond a view of ethical determinations as merely cultural and arbitrary. This overall orientation emerges most clearly in Epsilon, with its sustained critique of the purely conventional understanding of justice (consider, in particular, the distinction

remains inaccessible (illegible and unintelligible). Indeed, they cannot contemplate it because, says the text, they are not *deinoi* enough (368d). They lack the boundless resourcefulness, temerity, and sharpness of vision and cannot, therefore, claim that they access the *eidos*, possess it, and are directed by it. The entire dialogue revolves around such an unsettled making, a making indicating a certain finitude and powerlessness. Even in its concluding Book, the *Republic* reiterates the complexity of bringing forth. As mentioned above, it reveals the measure of making to be not so much an eidetic pattern but the community of “users” (601c). After all, even the “contemplative” maker at work in the *Timaeus* is evoked through a “likely,” “imaginal” *logos* or *muthos*. In this light, the Arendtian view of the subordination, in Plato, of politics or action to *tekhnê* (to a *tekhnê* understood, with Heidegger, in its knowing, contemplative, and potentially manipulative detachment) appears profoundly inaccurate. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958). Consider also John Sallis, “The Politics of the *chora*,” in *Platonic Legacies* (Albany: SUNY, 2004), 27-45.

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between human being and citizen [1130b27-29]²¹), and is further elaborated in Zeta, where Aristotle speaks of “natural” virtue (1144b1-1145a12) and crucially develops *sophia* as the ability of human beings to perceive themselves in their belonging in the non-human, in a cosmos incommensurate and irreducible to the human (1141a9-b8). We would, thus, acknowledge a certain “return” to and of nature—however, a return where nature returns transfigured, for at this point the term indicates a belonging radically irreducible to mechanical determinism and causation. Finally, we would have to note, with the final treatises, an overcoming of the primacy of measure, balance, and mediation—a movement from measure to measurelessness in which, however, measurelessness no longer means the unruly, unrestrained self-assertion of the human to whom nothing is denied (*panourgia*). As indications of excess in this further sense, suffice it to mention friendship (which is not, like the virtues, a matter of measure, but of *hyperbole* [1158a12, 1166b1]²²) and the concluding meditation on *nous* in Kappa (indicating the openness and self-transcendence of the human towards the divine). The architecture of the human at its culmination tends to leave the human behind, or, rather, discloses the human as essentially exceeding itself—as most essentially accomplished precisely in its rapturous thrust towards the non-human.

Following this trajectory more closely obviously exceeds the scope of the present essay. But it seems important at least to signal the broader framework of human

²¹Emphatically restated in *Politics* 1276b30-36.

²²See also *Eudemian Ethics* 1238b18-23.

construction and to remain mindful of the amplitude of Aristotle's vision.

5 Self-making and Self-overcoming

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Iota Aristotle discusses the enactment of the benefactor—the human being who can love, and thereby benefit, an other without expecting anything in return. This is a figure of supreme accomplishment: one who, out of fullness, in the plenitude of one's own activation/actualization, like a ripe fruit in its dehiscence, bursts open in a gesture of giving. Far from remaining confined within itself, self-contained, as it were, the human being transcends itself in a gratuitous act.

The benefactor in act is likened to the artist (1167b17-1168a5). The love they feel for their work makes them similar in their enactment: in both cases we observe a movement of self-overflowing that takes one beyond oneself. Such a movement compels one to bestow one's own resources on another, letting the process of self-actualization fall outside oneself and take on its own life. Like the artist, the benefactor gives herself beyond the give-and-take (the economy) of reciprocity, that is, without expecting to be reciprocated. As a matter of fact, neither artist nor benefactor is reciprocated by her work—by the work of art and by the work of benefiting (involving, at once, those benefited). Like making, the gesture of benefiting is its own fulfillment, proceeds from overabundance and affirms it, pursues no further end, is inexplicable in ways not dissimilar from grace (which, Aristotle notes in Epsilon, initiates acts of giving literally with no reason, outside calculation [1133a3-6]). However, what is most remarkable in the poi-

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etic act (and, *mutatis mutandis*, in the beneficial act) is the identity of artist and work, which Aristotle relates as follows:

... being is to all [something] they choose and love; we are by being in activity; for we are by living and acting. Now the artist engaged in activity is in some sense his work, and so he is fond of his work, because he is fond of being, too. And this is natural; for that which he is potentially is indicated by his work that is in actuality. (1168a6-10)

Just like the artist, then, the human at its best is its own work. Numerous aspects should be considered closely, in order to let this outstanding pronouncement resonate more amply: the delight in being, in feeling alive, which Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as *Eudemian Ethics*, addresses especially in the context of friendship as community of sensibility (*sunaisthesis*)²³; the cluster of being, acting (that is, self-activation), and living, here remarkably elaborated in terms of *tekhnê*, suggesting that aptly distinguishing acting from bringing forth will not have been as simple an affair; the *oeuvre* as one's actuality released into the world and wandering away, following its own courses; above all, and most comprehensively, the entire ethical labor transposed into the register of self-creation and artful making. Here, however, we should underline the peculiar variation on the theme of self-relation: the human being relating to itself from afar, as it were, from a

²³See in particular *Nicomachean Ethics* 1170a27-b19 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1245b23-4. Also Giorgio Agamben, *L'amico* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2007).

condition of non-self-coincidence, dissemination, and dispersion.

The passage highlights the theme of the human being building itself, bringing itself forth, having itself as its own task—having to carry itself out, actualizing its potentialities. The human being receives itself as an assignment—the work that nature left unfinished, whose completion in each case nature has left indeterminate. The human being must take up this work, even as s/he is essentially unprepared and unequipped for such an enterprise. The task is necessary and impossible. The human being cannot and yet must confront it. Such is the labor of freedom—freedom by nature, in the sense that nature allows for it, indeed contemplates and prescribes it (at stake is thus no self-determination in the face of nature); and freedom from nature, in the sense that the human phenomenon remains vastly unaccountable by reference to mechanical causation and natural determination in general.

It is clear that self-construction points to a distance from, even distance within, oneself. One is not simply one, not one simply. Here self-fashioning need not (in fact, does not) bespeak “techniques of the self” in the perspective of an allegedly infinite plasticity of the human, along the lines of Foucault’s or Nietzsche’s suggestions. Rather, it indicates the possibility of self-transformation, which is, in turn, related to the question of responsibility: developing beyond the early stage of imitation of others’ actions, taking the *arkhe* of movement into oneself, making it one’s own, becoming one’s own cause. Transformation means deconstructing what has come to be crystallized in oneself, undoing stratified shapes in order to make possible

the unprecedented, something new, always unique: not an object outside oneself, but a quality in oneself, or rather radiating from oneself, through one's acting—as in the medical art, which assists in the transition, in this body, from sickness to health; or as in the art of navigation, whose work (*ergon*) is nothing other than vigilant adaptability to the elements so as to navigate well; or as in the art of lyre playing, which studies the instrument so as to divine, in its silent body, possibilities of singing, bringing them forth, drawing from the instrument harmonious and ever unheard-of sounds.

At numberless junctures in the Aristotelian reflection (and, for that matter, in the Platonic one as well), these and other arts are figurations of human life itself. The deep syntax of the ethical discourse as a whole hinges on the artful (if not technical in the reductive, technological sense) paradigm. Even the most fundamental terms of the discussion (human being, excellence, actuality, happiness) are established and elucidated in thanks to the rhetorical deployment of the language of art. Of course, as we saw, at issue is no pure self-mastery, no self-fashioning in which one would become the subject and object of making. Prior to and beyond the logic of subject and object, of subjection and objectification, we came to contemplate a self-making that is at once a letting oneself go; a making oneself that is at once a being made by an other, in an enraptured movement beyond oneself indicating an uncontainable giving; a becoming oneself most fully, precisely in responsiveness and non-self-enclosure. The architecture of the human thus understood will never have meant simply acquiring forms of comportment, dogmatically stabilizing them, disposing of oneself at will, instrumentally,

arbitrarily, as if controlling the calculus of one's own construction.

6 Addendum: On Habit, Action, and Freedom

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Gamma Aristotle writes:

We have spoken of the virtues taken together, of their genus in outline; [we said] that they are middles and habits; the actions they flow from, they in turn bring about according to themselves; they are up to us and voluntary; and they are as right reason prescribes [*prostaxeî*]. But the actions and habits are not voluntary in the same way; while we have authority over the actions from beginning to end, knowing the particulars [the concrete consequences], regarding the habits we have authority over the beginning, but we do not know that which is added [*prosthesis*] according to the particulars, as is the case also with illnesses [when something develops in an undesirable direction]. But since it was up to us to behave in a certain way or not, because of this they are voluntary. (1114b26-1115a3)

The difference between actions and habits, with respect to their being voluntary, certainly lies in the fact that, while actions can be initiated and discontinued with a relatively high degree of autonomy, habits depend on us in their beginning only. Habits are literally that which comes

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to be had, a property or possession, *habitus* and abode, dressing and sheltering the body of impulses, appetites, and drives. We do initiate and sustain their formation. However, once formed, they enjoy a remarkable degree of stability.

Habits are the formations that come to be layered and structure what nature has left unstructured. Consider the statement opening treatise Beta, “none of the virtues of character arises in us naturally” (1103a19-20). Thus, “the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature. Rather we are by nature able to acquire them and we are completed through habit” (1103a24-26). The stabilization of habits constitutes for us a *teleiosis*, a completion that is at once initiation and perfection, the carrying out and achievement of the constructive task. At stake, then, is the formation (the architectonics) of what nature has left open and undetermined—the open-ended task of completing ourselves, founding our own ways where nature has not decided for us. Such a task we carry out in nature’s silence, for nature’s prescriptions are lacking, inaudible, or yet unintelligible. Not fully dominated by necessity, we have to build the structures by which, within which, we shall live.

Such is the task of freedom—and a task we cannot not take up. We should note the binding character of freedom, here. Being human is not given, but a task, work. It is having to be, having to become human. Freedom should be understood in this light, as a natural prescription. That is why the formation of habits, while not by nature, is likewise not against it. At the heart of nature, nature has left itself unfulfilled. It is nature that calls for the achievement of what is left unachieved—although nature will not pro-

vide directions, but rather demands each time the work of choice, the singular path taken.²⁴

Thus, the habits supplement nature and prove almost as unbending, as invincible as nature.²⁵ Once acquired, such properties cannot be easily shed, dismantled, as it were, at will. One can work on de-activating them, on replacing them with other habits (i.e., beginning to act otherwise than habitually, in order to establish new habits, new configurations of character). But it is an arduous work.

However, it is noteworthy that, at this point, Aristotle should state that we control the outcomes of actions, their entire trajectory from beginning to end. This may strike one as strange, especially in light of the opening considerations in Gamma, regarding the way in which human action is pervaded by a deficiency in mastery that is far from accidental. Action *always* unfolds in a unique context, within a singular delimitation of possibility, in the midst of proliferating contingent details, fugitive and without principle—without principle in the sense of incalculable, and yet, participating in the interplay of factors that influence and determine the outcome of action. Thus, at the inception of Gamma Aristotle is particularly concerned

²⁴Thus, despite the apparent contrast at 1094b20, we cannot here assume a sharp opposition of nature and convention, *phusis* and *nomos*. *Phusis* requires the work of *nomos*, even as the supplementation provided by *nomos* remains irreducible, excessive, and discontinuous vis-à-vis *phusis*. Or, perhaps, it is *phusis* itself that does not coincide with itself and emerges as self-differing.

²⁵Let us leave aside, for the moment, the fact that nature as well displays a kind of plasticity, of availability to change. Even nature, Aristotle intimates in the course of his discussion on justice in *Nicomachean Ethics* Epsilon, may not be invincible—may in fact be transformed, by exercise (1134b25-35).

with underlining the multiplicity, mobility, and dissemination of the *arkhai* of action—the fact that they almost never are simply *in* the individual, let alone under control. In “mixed” actions, the *arkhe* is both within and without the individual human being (1109b35-1110b9).

In this context, once more, Aristotle illustrates mixed actions by reference to navigation, specifically to the situation in which, during a storm, one would throw goods overboard for the sake of the safety of the passengers and of the ship itself. Taken “without qualification,” such an action might seem to be involuntary. In abstract, no one in one’s right mind would choose to do that. However, Aristotle does not limit himself to acknowledging the mixed character of this action, its being both voluntary and involuntary, informed by both individual deliberation and external factors. Rather, he peremptorily insists that this action must be evaluated as voluntary: as long as it can be ascribed even partially to the individual’s reckoning, as long as the cause of movement can even marginally be situated in the individual, the action is voluntary and one carries the responsibility for it.

But navigation, we saw, is for Aristotle a figure of the human condition itself. Thus, encountering the world and having to act while only partially controlling causes, factors, and circumstances, is our altogether ordinary predicament. Life is that context (that flowing river or ocean) in which most frequently the unpredictable happens, even overwhelmingly. Thus, the deliberative process has to do with keeping one’s course, or adjusting it appropriately, in a constant interplay (negotiation) with the surroundings, the shifting conditions, the things coming at us and happening to us. Difficulties of this kind are

common and structural, and differ only in degree from the emergency (the storm) where safety and survival are at issue.

This means that the principle is most often dispersed, between and across inside and outside. But acting in these mixed conditions Aristotle calls voluntary. The involuntary is that which completely lacks the contribution of an acting being, thus the mixed is *not* both voluntary and involuntary. For human beings it is always a matter of estimating and assessing the circumstances (what to do, to whom, in what respect, to what degree, at what moment in time), of reading into the intimate structures of the situation, with its complexity and aspects of insurmountable inscrutability, such that ignorance about the particulars may not be ruled out *a priori*.

This is why we never simply observe autonomous and self-determining agents, but dynamics of envelopment and belonging, the interpenetration of activity (self-enactment, *energeia*) and passivity (*passkhein* [1110a3]). In this connection we should underscore the pervasiveness, in this discussion, of the language of things coming to be “through us” (*di’ hemon*) and causes operating “through the human being” (1112a30-1112b1).²⁶ The *dia* is the figure of the circumstances I always have to meet, i.e., not simply doing what I want, but what I can, through the inflection of this encounter. The action is always the outcome of a composite situation with manifold origin—neither explainable in terms of *ananke* in a mechanistic sense nor ascribable to unmitigated *liberum arbitrium*. In sum, neither cultural/spiritual constructivism nor natural determinism

²⁶But also 1112b4, 1112b16-19, 1112b28-31.

seem especially pertinent in the approach to this line of thinking.

Freedom and the responsibility that pertains to any free enactment (any action chosen and caused) are thought, in this context, in the vicinity of care (*epimeleia*): the attentiveness and solicitous awareness accompanying action, making it fully accomplished, conscious, and luminous. Indeed, in Gamma *ameleia* (negligence, carelessness) is linked to culpability. It is an omission for which one is to be blamed and a mark of evil (*mokhtheria*):

Human beings are punished also for being ignorant of certain legal matters which are not difficult to learn and should be known; and likewise whenever they are thought to be ignorant through carelessness [*di' ameleian*], since it is up to them not to be ignorant, for they have the power of exercising care [*epimelethenai*]. But perhaps they are of such a kind as not to exercise care. Still, it is they themselves who, by living without restraint [*aneimenos*], are responsible [are the cause] for having become human beings of such a kind.... (1113b35-1114a5)

Indeed, anyone who is “not deformed” may reach happiness (one’s own fullness) through *mathesis* and *epimeleia* (1099b20). Here, once again, we hear an echo of Plato in Aristotle’s meditation on the work of becoming human and the question of human *dunamis*, as though Aristotle’s ethical thought were sustained by a Platonic dictation. The exhortation still resounding in Aristotle comes from *Republic X*, but its voice sounds even more remote than Plato’s own. In matters regarding choosing one’s life,

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choosing the course of action determining one's trajectory across this life, it says: "Let the one who is beginning not be careless [*ameleito*] about his choice, let the one who is last not be discouraged" (619b).