

## Review Essays

Review Essay: Ronna Burger's *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*, Paula Gottlieb's *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics*, and Eric Salem's *In Pursuit of the Good: Intellect and Action in Aristotle's Ethics*

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### 1. Introduction

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) has been commented on, translated, and discussed extensively throughout the millennia. There have periodically been surges in scholarship on the *NE* across the twentieth century, including a recent one that seems to have originated in the 1970s. The three book-length treatments under review add to this surge: Ronna Burger's *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates* (2008), Paula Gottlieb's *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics* (2009), and Eric Salem's *In Pursuit of the Good* (2010).<sup>1</sup> Scholarly interest in Aristotle's ethical theory has also sometimes been met with a parallel interest in wider public discourse. The current surge is no exception. In 2011 alone there have been dozens of news items citing Aristotle's ethical and political works, as well as a prominent review of Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins's new translation of the *NE*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Eric Salem, *In Pursuit of the Good: Intellect and Action in Aristotle's Ethics* (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2010). For an extensive bibliography of such scholarship over the previous century or so, see Thornton Lockwood, "A Topical Bibliography of Scholarship on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1880-2004," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 30 (2005), pp. 1-116.

<sup>2</sup> See *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), and the review of this translation by Harry Jaffa, "Aristotle and the Higher Good," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/03/books/review/book-review-aristotles-nicomachean-ethics.html?pagewanted=all>. This review did not fall on an

What accounts for the interest in Aristotelian ethics? In brief, the answer seems to be interest in Aristotle's conception of virtue and responsibility. On the one hand, Aristotle's accounts of moral truth, courage, moral experience, practical reason, and our political nature all contrast sharply with the incivility and irresponsibility of American life. The issues of concern range from the recent financial crisis and the U.S. debt to home-grown terrorism and community service.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, some commentators find Aristotelian virtue in our midst. One, for example, finds Aristotelian magnanimity in New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who plans to contribute \$30 million of his own wealth toward a New York City initiative to aid that city's underprivileged minority youth.<sup>4</sup> So Aristotle remains relevant.

Burger, Gottlieb, and Salem focus to varying degrees on examining, articulating, and interpreting Aristotle's view on the best way of life for humans.<sup>5</sup> Given that a large part of the historical debate over this topic revolves around whether the best human life is one of contemplation and/or moral virtue, it is unsurprising that philosophers are fascinated by it: the debate goes to the heart of the place of their vocation in the good life. In addition to this focus, the authors each also share the public's interest with how virtue ethics intersects with politics and public life. The final chapter in each of these three books in some way speaks to how Aristotle's ethical

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apathetic public. See also the reader response to Jaffa's review in the letter-to-the-editor section of *The New York Times* of July 15, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/books/review/aristotles-ethics.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for a few very recent examples, Christopher Arps, "Does America Defaulting on Its Debt Mean We'll Need a Bailout Like Greece?" *BigGovernment*, July 28, 2011, accessed online at: <http://biggovernment.com/carps/2011/07/28/does-america-defaulting-on-its-debt-mean-well-need-a-bailout-like-greece/>; Charles P. Pierce, "The Bomb That Didn't Go Off," *Esquire*, July 21, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.esquire.com/features/homegrown-terrorism-us-0811>; and Front Porch's Simon, "An Invitation to We the People—Pt. II," *Nassau Guardian*, July 26, 2011, accessed online at: [http://www.thenassauguardian.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=11789&Itemid=86](http://www.thenassauguardian.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11789&Itemid=86).

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas Farrell, "Mayor Bloomberg's Bold New Initiative Is Magnanimous," *OpEdNews.com*, August 7, 2011, accessed online at: <http://www.opednews.com/articles/Mayor-Bloomberg-s-Bold-New-by-Thomas-Farrell-110807-227.html>.

<sup>5</sup> This is Burger's and Salem's primary focus. Gottlieb does so in a more oblique way, though, since she argues that there is a lot of ground to clear before we can fruitfully engage with this topic: "It is not my intention to enter the debate about whether happiness consists merely in contemplation or also or only in ethical virtue at this juncture. . . . I think that there is an important puzzle to be solved before this debate even gets off the ground" (p. 60 n. 26). Consequently, her main focus is otherwise for a substantial portion of her book.

insights can inform our interactions in civil society and stabilize politics for the common good.

## 2. Burger's *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*

According to Burger, the question that inspires her analysis of the *NE* is as follows: "How is the teaching of the *Ethics* about human happiness to be understood when its speeches are interpreted in light of the deed that we can call the action of the *Ethics*?" (p. 9). Two significant assumptions underlie her question: first, that the *NE* is not easily read on its own as a "coherent whole" (p. 1) and, second, that an ironic reading of the text is required to make "the work a whole," juxtaposing the "speeches" of the *NE* with the "deed" of its argument (p. 5). She thinks that a straightforward reading of the text faces two major problems. For one thing, we would have no audience for the *NE*: those with "the that" of ethics would not need to read it because "the why" is unnecessary for them, and those without "the that" would never understand it because they have not been habituated properly.<sup>6</sup> For another, there would remain a conflict between the largely "inclusive" interpretation of happiness that pervades most of the *NE* and the "exclusive" interpretation of happiness that marks *NE X*.<sup>7</sup>

Burger argues that her ironic interpretative strategy enables us to see several important things. The real audience of the *NE* is either someone disgruntled with the discrepancy between "the that"—our initial stock of moral beliefs—and the conflicting practices he sees around him, or else someone who is provoked out of passive acceptance of "the that" by Aristotle's puzzles (p. 4). The "deed" of the *NE* is none other than an extended dialogue with Socrates, whom Aristotle "constructs . . . as a perfect foil against which to develop a different account of virtue of character" (p. 5). The upshot of this "dialogic deed" is the conclusion that the happiness we are

<sup>6</sup> At *NE* I.4.1095b7-8, the Aristotelian phrase "the that" (*to hoti*) refers to recognizing that something is true (e.g., "Murder is bad"), and "the why" (*tou dioti*) refers to understanding the justification or ultimate account for why something is true (e.g., "Murder is bad because it violates a person's right to life.").

<sup>7</sup> Burger explains the exclusive/inclusive distinction in the following way: The "exclusive" understanding of happiness is "the life most singly devoted to the activity of contemplation" and the "inclusive" understanding holds that "life without ethical virtue or friendship, at the very least, could never be a good one for a human being" (p. 8). Burger is careful to avoid muddying the waters with the terminology of contemplation as a "dominant-end" in the happy life—a term introduced by W. F. R. Hardie in his *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) and reinforced by John Cooper in his *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). She follows Fred D. Miller's reasoning that "dominant . . . is not strictly a contrary" of "inclusive," since one can have a set of inclusive goods that constitutes an end with a member of the set being the dominant good (p. 235 n. 41); see Fred D. Miller, Jr., "Book Review of John Cooper's *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*," *Reason Papers* 4 (Winter 1978), p. 112.

seeking is dialogical activity, “what we have been doing” all along as readers and implicit dialogue partners (p. 214). Hence, the only way to avoid the conflict Burger sees in Aristotle’s “speeches”—concerning inclusive and exclusive characterizations of happiness—is for us to see that he is as much a master ironist as are Plato or Socrates.

The structure of Burger’s argument for this unusual conclusion emerges in the course of her general commentary on nearly every chapter of every book of the *NE*. She highlights numerous points of ambiguity, incompleteness, and seeming inconsistency throughout her brief summaries and commentaries on each part of the *NE*, and notes many parallels between the moves of the *NE* and similar moves in various Platonic dialogues, all of which provide a set-up for her interpretive thesis. Given that the conclusion of Aristotle’s “function argument” is that “the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one” (*NE* I.7.1098a16-18),<sup>8</sup> it becomes all-important “what kind of virtue is being held up as a measure” (p. 34). Enter Aristotle’s “dialogue with Socrates,” which occurs in two phases in *NE* I-VI and VI-X, with Book VI serving as the crucial “turning point.”

Phase one of Burger’s argument (Chapters 1-4) explicitly begins (in *NE* III.8.1116b4-5) with Socrates holding the intellectualist thesis that “virtue is knowledge” and hence unified by reason. She argues, though, that the dialogue with Socrates implicitly begins in *NE* II, where Aristotle anticipates rejecting the upcoming Socratic view by maintaining a split between the rational and non-rational parts of the human soul. He attaches intellectual virtue to the rational part (where knowledge resides) and ethical virtue to the non-rational part (where the habituated, proper emotional disposition of the mean between two extremes resides), and describes a plurality of virtues in *NE* III-V that are beholden to sources other than reason (e.g., beauty and justice). However, by the end of *NE* VI Aristotle denies this split, because the person with *phronesis* (practical wisdom) is the one who uses reason to judge which actions hit the mean, *phronesis* is the intellectual virtue of the reasoning part of the soul concerned with determining what is good and bad for humans, and *phronesis* unifies the virtues. Aristotle’s view comes very close to Socrates’s here, but avoids collapsing into it by subordinating *phronesis* to another intellectual virtue, namely, *sophia* (contemplative wisdom) (p. 119). *Phronesis* is engaged in for the sake of *sophia*, but *sophia* is needed in order to engage in *phronesis*, for *phronesis* “would seem to require as its basis theoretical knowledge of human nature as such” (p. 117). This deep connection between *phronesis* and *sophia* seems to tether them so closely that Burger cannot help but “wonder about the sharp cut between these two intellectual virtues” (p. 123).

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<sup>8</sup> All translations of Aristotle’s *NE* (unless otherwise indicated) are those of Terence Irwin in *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999).

Phase two (Chapters 5-7) involves two more quickly dissolved forms of resistance to Socrates's intellectualist position. First, Aristotle rejects out of hand the Socratic view that *akrasia* (incontinence, weakness of will) is impossible (at *NE* VII.3.1145b27-28). Aristotle regards it as obvious that people can know what is good and yet either act contrary to that knowledge or fail to act on it. For Socrates, if someone has moral knowledge, he will do what is good; if he does what is bad, he must be acting out of ignorance. Burger takes us through Aristotle's series of qualifications on this issue, so that before *NE* VII is done, his "appeal to practical reasoning has served, thus far, not so much to save the phenomenon of *akrasia* as to unpack the features of 'knowing' that make Socrates declare it impossible" (p. 141). This leaves Aristotle in a weakened position vis-à-vis his attempt to drive a wedge in between virtue and knowledge.

Second, and even more surprisingly, despite the conclusion of phase one, Aristotle maintains in *NE* X the clear superiority of *theoria* (theoretical wisdom) over moral virtue. Burger provides two suggestions for dealing with this apparent paradox: (1) Aristotle's lengthy discussion of friendship in *NE* VIII-IX that reveals humans to be dialogic (and hence moral/political) beings, and (2) his "reminder of the need to interpret speeches in light of deeds" (p. 212). In order to make sense of Aristotle's inconsistencies, Burger urges us to place more trust in Aristotle's dialogic action, or "deed," than his "speeches." Human happiness is nothing short of engaging in a Socratic dialogue: "This is an *energeia* of *theoria* that takes place through the activity of sharing speeches and thoughts, which is, as the discussion of friendship established, what living together means for humans; it is in that way a realization at once of our political and our rational nature" (p. 214).

*Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates* is provocative and full of fascinating connections between the *NE* and the Platonic corpus. At the very least, readers will pause to reconsider the *NE*'s arguments and reflect on whether Burger's way of reading Aristotle's treatise enriches our understanding of his work in the ways she suggests and whether the act of reading transforms our moral and political self-understanding. And although Aristotle's aporetic, dialectical method keeps us in mind of the fact that he is often wrestling with the competing ideas of specific individuals, Burger places before us more sharply and fully the ways in which Aristotle resumes and critiques ethical discussions framed by Plato, his long-time teacher and conversation partner. She makes it much easier for us to contextualize these disputes by locating the source of them in various Platonic dialogues (with specific references liberally sprinkled throughout the text and the sixty-one pages of extensive endnotes).

Although Burger's overall interpretive strategy is clear and intriguing, the details of her interpretive argument are often difficult to follow, buried as they are in her general summary of and commentary on the *NE*. It would have served her project better to have focused on one or the other task, interpretation or commentary; as it stands, both tasks suffer from this divided focus. Steven Skultety notes that *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates* "often

reads as if it is suspended between different projects,” and Kevin Cherry concurs that an exploration of potential problems for her thesis and a fuller development of interesting points she raises are hampered by the “entanglement of [the book’s] argumentative thesis and its commentary character.”<sup>9</sup> The commentary aspect of the book is generally too quick, and thus cannot do justice to the scholarly disputes surrounding the many issues that arise in the course of the *NE*. Many suggestive insights suitable for the purpose of a commentary are relegated to the endnotes where they cannot fully be developed. And despite the extensive endnotes, the range of scholarly dispute over issues such as the function argument (pp. 30-36), the nature of the human soul (pp. 41-43, 112-15, 172-73), and equity (pp. 90-91, 104), is not reflected much in the text; many seminal articles and books on those issues do not make it into the bibliography. While it is necessary for Burger to raise and comment on *some* of the dozens of issues she summarizes in order to contextualize her interpretive thesis, not all of that work was needed for interpretive purposes.<sup>10</sup>

With respect to Burger’s interpretive strategy, some have lauded it as “profound,” “magisterial,” and one that “cannot be ignored by anyone who intends to write on the *Ethics*.”<sup>11</sup> Others admire its novelty and fruitfulness, but are more critical about the way in which the strategy is implemented. Thornton Lockwood raises an important issue concerning the “Socrates problem.” Without questioning the validity of Burger’s “use of Socrates as an heuristic device for interpreting the *Ethics*,” Lockwood explains that she slides back and forth between passages where Aristotle is engaged in a dialogic “trajectory” with the Platonic Socrates and the historical Socrates, as though there were one unambiguous Socrates (the Platonic Socrates) who is the target of Aristotle’s comments.<sup>12</sup> Sorting out carefully “which Socrates,”

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Skultety, “Book Review of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (December 2009), accessed online at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23879-aristotle-s-dialogue-with-socrates-on-the-nicomachean-ethics/>; Kevin Cherry, “Aristotle’s Socratic Turn: Book Review of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*,” *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 4 (Fall 2009), p. 674. For a similar criticism, see also Tom Angier, “Book Review of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 60, no. 240 (July 2010), p. 639.

<sup>10</sup> Skultety points out, for example, that “in the stretch of text from pages 153-206 (nearly a quarter of the book) Socrates does not make a single appearance”; see Skultety, “Book Review of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*.”

<sup>11</sup> Donald Lindenmuth, “Book Review of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Review of Metaphysics* 62, no. 3 (March 2009), p. 639.

<sup>12</sup> See Thornton Lockwood, “Book Review of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (August 2009),

Lockwood suggests, would have strengthened this heuristic device. Tom Angier presses this “which Socrates” problem more forcefully than does Lockwood. He points to some places in Burger’s text where she tries to bolster her ironic reading of Aristotle with what she regards as Aristotle’s ironic reading of the Platonic Socrates. For example, when discussing Aristotle’s confrontation with the Socratic thesis that “virtue is knowledge,” Burger plays with the idea that “the virtues as *logoi* are the questions Socrates pursues through the deed of conversing . . . ; and the passion that drives his pursuit . . . is not a matter of mere speeches” (p. 128). She regards the “true understanding of human excellence” as “hidden” behind Socrates’s words and revealed in his “practice of inquiry” (p. 128). Angier objects to this “revelatory mode of argument,” finding it dubious that one could discern Socrates’s “real views” by reading them off “his (tendentiously described) ‘quest’” rather than inferring them “from his explicit arguments and claims.”<sup>13</sup>

Burger’s subtle attention to the deeds of the historical Socrates rather than the words of the Platonic Socrates is not the only problematic employment of irony in her book. Angier briefly notes this as well. He argues (*contra* Burger) that the fact that Aristotle’s claim in *NE* X that happiness is found in *theoria* comes after nine books arguing for the centrality of moral virtue “does not establish *irony*, especially since Aristotle’s use of continuous sequential argument is hardly hospitable to irony in the first place.”<sup>14</sup> Taking a cue from Angier’s skepticism, I would argue further that Burger’s ironic interpretive strategy suffers from three difficulties. First, the strategy is offered largely outside of the larger context of scholarship on the *NE*. While the *NE* is challenging to translate and to understand, and various specific and general arguments are questionable or seemingly inconsistent, scholars have offered ways of resolving alleged inconsistencies in the *NE* based on a straightforward reading, especially when read in conjunction with relevant texts from the rest of Aristotle’s corpus, such as *Metaphysics*, *De Anima*, and *Posterior Analytics*. Recall that one of the claimed benefits of Burger’s approach is that it promises to resolve internal contradictions by means of her extra-textual ironic approach. One might wonder, as does Skultety, “why we should turn away from th[e] established body of scholarship.”<sup>15</sup> Burger

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accessed online at: <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2009/2009-08-33.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Angier, “Book Review of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*,” p. 640.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Skultety, “Book Review of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*.” Just a few examples of this large body of scholarship include Anthony Kenny, *The Aristotelian Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); John Cooper, “Contemplation and Happiness: A Reconsideration,” *Synthese* 72 (1987), pp. 187-216; and Terence Irwin, “The Structure of Aristotelian Happiness,” *Ethics* 101 (1991), pp. 382-91.

assumes rather than establishes that a straightforward reading of the *NE* cannot yield “wholeness.”

Second, recall that Burger sets out to solve the supposed problem of Aristotle’s audience. However, the nature of this problem is puzzling. According to Burger, a straightforward reading of Aristotle’s key “audience passage” at *NE* I.4.1095a31-1095b12 is “comically paradoxical” because those with “the that” don’t need “the why” of the *NE* and those without “the that” are unsuitable for studying the *NE* (p. 20; see also pp. 3-4 and 21). Hence, she concludes, Aristotle’s real audience must be a different type of person and it’s to that type of person that the “dialogic deed” of the *NE* is pitched. She even alludes in an endnote to her Platonic reading on this point: “Aristotle would be looking, in that case, for an audience not unlike Glaucon and Adeimantus, who want Socrates to show them the real good of practicing the justice praised by convention” (p. 233 n. 23). However, she has read far too much into that passage. I am not denying that audience is important, nor am I denying that people like Glaucon may be part of Aristotle’s audience. The fact is, however, Aristotle is amply clear about his method and purpose at *NE* I.4, and nothing about his claims there are ironic. He explains that in beginning an ethical inquiry “from things known to us” on our way toward ethical first principles “known without qualification,” our conversation partners (often students) can begin from “the that . . . without also knowing why” those things are true. The straightforward purpose of ethical inquiry is to move us from Hesiod’s noble listener to his autonomous thinker (*NE* I.4.1095b3-12). There is no paradox here, because it’s not that once one has “the that” then “the why” is unnecessary full stop, but rather, that those with “the that” don’t need to have “the why” *in order to begin* their ethical studies. Burger has mistakenly read the passage in the former way rather than the latter.

The implications of the good life seen as an ironic Platonic-Aristotelian dialogue are far-reaching and contentious, particularly for moral education and politics, since a deliberately ironic approach to moral pedagogy might well involve deception, paternalism, and condescension. It thus makes a significant difference whether Aristotle’s approach to engaging in ethical inquiry is straightforward in nature or involves irony. Whatever suspicions students or citizens might have about ironic teachers or politicians, such suspicions are unwarranted in Aristotle’s case. He gives us explicit sign posts about what he is doing and why in a way that is up front about and sensitive to the developmental level of his audience.

Third, getting caught up in the intricacies of an ironic interpretive strategy has perhaps induced Burger to omit discussion of key elements of Aristotle’s ethical theory that distinguish it from those of his forerunners. As remarked above, how distinct Aristotle’s view is from that of Socrates will depend in part on “which Socrates” we take him to be addressing. In any event, while Aristotle’s considered view about happiness may be closer to that



of Socrates than it at first seems when specific ethical issues are introduced, his view is still different from that of both the Platonic and the historical Socrates. The texture of the good life and its pursuit will vary depending on whether one's vision of happiness is purification of the soul in preparation for an afterlife (Socrates's in the *Phaedo*), extreme self-denial for the sake of the state (Plato's Socrates in the *Republic*), or the attainment during one's natural lifespan of *eudaimonia* for oneself and those in one's larger social context (Aristotle's in the *NE* and *Politics*).

### 3. Gottlieb's *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics*

Contrary to Burger (and Salem, as discussed below in Section 4), Gottlieb engages in a straightforward reading of the *NE*. Her interpretive strategy relies on raising the profile of the "much-maligned doctrine of the mean" (p. 3) and the "nameless virtues," and showing how a fresh look at both can yield much fruit. A better understanding of the nameless virtues solves long-standing interpretive problems in the *NE* and does a better job at resolving problems in moral philosophy than utilitarianism or Kantian deontology. Ultimately, Gottlieb wants to show us a "living" virtue ethics that is a serious (and superior) competitor to rival contemporary moral theories. She accomplishes this purpose by dividing her book into two parts: "Ethical Virtue," comprising Chapters 1-5, focuses on "internal" issues of textual interpretation and consistency, and "Ethical Reasoning," comprising Chapters 6-10, applies Aristotle's virtue ethics to contemporary ethical issues.

The two linchpins of Gottlieb's project are the doctrine of the mean (Chapter 1) and the nameless virtues (Chapter 2). The doctrine of the mean has three aspects: (1) It is a doctrine of equilibrium—where one possesses a good disposition that allows one to judge rightly in any context—rather than a moderation of vices. (2) It involves a nuanced view of the relativistic and changing features of contextual choice. (3) It involves a "triadic taxonomy of different mentalities" for each virtue: the person with *phronesis* (who is in the mean state of virtue), the unscrupulous person (who is in the vicious state of excess), and the ingenuous/unworldly person (who is in the vicious state of deficiency) (p. 37). The triadic aspect of the doctrine of the mean then helps us to "locate" the nameless virtues. These virtues should be emphasized because they "deal with a most important aspect of human nature, the social," a fact whose importance re-emerges in Chapter 10 where political community and its preconditions are explored (p. 49). These virtues also avoid the common charge that Aristotle's virtues are parochial, because they are connected to universal human functioning that transcends cultures and because they help Aristotle to select particular dispositions as virtues despite the fact that his culture had not yet given them a name.

Gottlieb then challenges those who think that virtues are needed in order to correct an inherently defective human nature (e.g., Philippa Foot and Christine Korsgaard), and defends a non-remedial view of the virtues. She combines the equilibrium aspect of the doctrine of the mean with Aristotle's function argument, and argues that an individual actualizes his nature

(inherently neither good nor bad) when he exercises ethical virtue, and would need such virtues even in a well-functioning state (*polis*) (Chapter 3). Realizing that another common objection to virtue ethics is that they are groundless, she devotes Chapter 4 to justifying Aristotle's list of virtues and assessing whether additional candidates for virtues belong on the list: "If human psychology and way of life, including the fact that humans are social animals, can give one the sphere of the virtues, only the doctrine of the mean can say what the *good* dispositions in those spheres are" (p. 77). She then explains the tight connection between *phronesis* and ethical virtue that yields a "unity of the virtues" doctrine (Chapter 5). We possess the ethical virtues when our actions "involve correct reason" and are not merely "according to reason," so that *phronesis* integrates our soul by having us in "the correct intellectual disposition" (p. 106). This disposition just *is* the state of equilibrium involved in the doctrine of the mean.

Having rescued the doctrine of the mean and the nameless virtues from obscurity, ironed out some issues internal to the *NE*, and defused some criticisms that scholars have lodged against Aristotle's virtue ethics, Gottlieb applies his moral theory to moral dilemmas (Chapter 6), moral motivation (Chapter 7), the practical syllogism (Chapter 8), how educated a good person needs to be (Chapter 9), and the intersection between ethics and politics (Chapter 10). Drawing on various discussions in the *NE*, including the relativistic aspect of the doctrine of the mean, she shows how the "tragic dilemmas" ubiquitous in contemporary moral theorizing (as characterized e.g., by Michael Stocker and Rosalind Hursthouse) can be dissolved. Instead of having "dirty hands" from choosing a "lesser evil," Aristotelian moral agents can instead choose the best option from bad circumstances and retain their moral integrity. Gottlieb finds Aristotle's view, unlike Kantianism, "fundamentally humane" on this issue (p. 132). She then explains how Aristotle's view compares favorably to those of Plato, Kantians, and utilitarians with respect to how the ethically virtuous person can choose the virtues for their own sake and for the sake of happiness in such a way that choosing the virtues for the sake of happiness does not undermine choosing the virtues for their own sake. Taking a rather novel interpretation of the practical syllogism, she uses it to clarify the deep connection between ethical virtue and *phronesis* that arose in her discussion of the unity of the virtues. She does this by focusing on the first half of both the major and minor premises in the practical syllogism and maintaining that *phronesis* and the nameless virtue of truthfulness will enable the good person to read into those premises "the virtue salient to the situation at hand" (p. 152) so as to yield the proper action-guiding conclusion.

Lest Aristotle's virtue ethics sound too demanding for the ordinary good person, Gottlieb turns her attention to education and politics and shows how his moral theory is more democratic than it has perhaps sounded in the preceding eight chapters. The ethically virtuous person would need to have experience, some understanding of human psychology, some general principles, and at least an implicit understanding "that the virtues make people

function well,” but he would “not need to know a complete account of what a function is or how it relates to Aristotelian substance or essence” (p. 182). The grounding of the function argument and a full-blown understanding of Aristotelian metaphysics would be needed only by political rulers (p. 187). Gottlieb next explains that a *polis* (political community) is needed for exercising the virtues so that people have the chance to become the best they can in accordance with the function argument, a theme that harks back to the non-remedial nature of the virtues. The political context is where nameless virtues such as truthfulness and friendliness become most crucial for facilitating a smoothly functioning political process. The need to exercise the nameless virtues, she argues, tells in favor of a democratic polity where “the collective virtue and practical wisdom of the majority” can sometimes “equal or surpass” that of one or a few good people (p. 203). Since the aim of a proper *polis* is the actualized happiness of its citizens, the legislator must know what happiness is, so that we finally circle back to the issue of the best human life: “Is it contemplative and/or ethically virtuous activity?” Gottlieb’s conclusion on this matter is that trying to “rank” happy lives “makes no sense”; “What counts as a happy life depends on the particular human being who is living it, her particular abilities, and the very particular circumstances encountered in her life. Ranking happiness in the abstract, then, seems out of place. While a philosophical life might suit one person, it might be inappropriate for another, and so on” (p. 196). The legislators’ role is to create a *polis* that fosters conditions that educate people toward virtue; the selection of which kind of life is happy is left to individuals to determine.

Gottlieb’s prose is clear, and her book is accessible both to a general philosophical audience and to specialists in ancient philosophy. It’s not possible to do justice to the wide range of important topics she engages, so I shall focus on three of the most insightful contributions she makes as well as two difficulties with her account. Despite the problems I discuss below, those looking for the contemporary relevance of a naturalistic version of virtue ethics will find much of value in Gottlieb’s book.

One of the strengths of *The Virtue of Aristotle’s Ethics* lies in clarifying how the doctrine of the mean is about equilibrium rather than moderation. Untangling how one enters this state of equilibrium so as to actualize one’s nature via the cultivation of moral virtue and *phronesis* has the benefit of providing some sort of justification for particular virtues. This enables Gottlieb’s audience to understand why certain dispositions and not others count as virtues (though she could have developed more fully the justificatory dimension)—something that more intuitionistic versions of virtue ethics fail to provide, and which leads some to write off virtue ethics as being merely a form of ethical relativism. It’s true, as Gosta Gronroos notes, that the equilibrium interpretation of the mean is not entirely new.<sup>16</sup> However,

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<sup>16</sup> See Gosta Gronroos, “Book Review of Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle’s Ethics*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (September 2009), accessed online at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24181/?id=17607>. Other scholars who have discussed

given that this is a book intended for an audience wider than other academics and Aristotle scholars—and that a fairly common understanding of being good is to be “moderate” in satisfying one’s desires and/or vices (e.g., “I lie only a little”)—Gottlieb’s detailed elaboration of the equilibrium interpretation is welcome.<sup>17</sup>

The power of Gottlieb’s emphasis on the mean as equilibrium is augmented by its connection to her account of the non-remedial nature of the virtues. Aristotle’s version of virtue ethics is not a theory about keeping inherently wayward people in line. It is instead about cultivating one’s moral judgment in order to be able to discern what is good to do in even the most complex circumstances for the sake of one’s *eudaimonia*. Striving toward moral perfection, then, is not a painful effort to overcome one’s nature, but rather, how one actualizes one’s nature. This kind of account recognizes that humans are born incomplete—on account of being born with desires but without a fully developed rational faculty—but not inherently flawed or defective. Aristotle’s is a developmental theory that leaves a central role for moral education to play in assisting one another in the cultivation of *phronesis* and self-actualization through reasoned inquiry. Though not everyone will act virtuously—some might need to be punished for certain vices through social and/or political mechanisms—this does not make correction or punishment the primary purpose of moral and political principles. The virtues are needed at all times, including “when things [a]re going right” (p. 64).

One of the best features of Gottlieb’s book is her use of Aristotle’s theory to dissolve the supposedly intractable and ubiquitous “moral (or tragic) dilemmas” in which we get our hands (i.e., characters) “dirty” no matter what we choose. Belief in moral dilemmas is driven in large part by the deontological claim that we have absolute moral duties that either conflict with one another or with the demands of practical life. The alleged dilemma is that no one could choose to fulfill one of the duties without violating the other, or respond to practical exigencies without violating a duty, so that regrettably one must end up doing something inherently wrong. Some moral

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Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean in this way include, e.g., Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 2; and Joe Sachs, “Aristotle: Ethics,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, July 22, 2005, accessed online at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aris-eth/>.

<sup>17</sup> David Keyt objects to viewing equilibrium as a third aspect of the doctrine of the mean; he thinks that the concept of equilibrium is not found in Aristotle’s text, while the other two aspects of “location” and “relativity” are. He suggests that rather than seeing equilibrium as a third aspect, we instead see it as Gottlieb’s “interpretation of location and relativity”; see David Keyt, “Book Review of Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle’s Ethics*,” *Ethics* 120, no. 4 (July 2010), p. 856. What Keyt offers is a friendly amendment to Gottlieb’s thesis that affects its presentation more than its substantive content. So Gottlieb could welcome his suggestion without any adverse effects for her overall theory.

theorists try to work their way out of deontological moral conflict by invoking utilitarianism as a way of choosing the “lesser of two evils,” but this strategy still leaves such theorists with “dirty hands.” The issue arises most acutely in Just War Theory, where the problem arises from an explicit attempt to combine deontology with consequentialism.<sup>18</sup>

Gottlieb’s way of dissolving moral dilemmas is twofold. First, she notes that many cases of so-called moral dilemmas are presented too simplistically, so that they could be dissolved by a better description of the case that is more sensitive to the full complexity of the circumstances. On this count, she suggests, virtue ethics is superior especially to Kantian deontology. This in itself, though, would only minimize the problem of moral dilemmas rather than eradicate it.<sup>19</sup> Second, and more important, is placing moral choice in context. Gottlieb has us consider Aristotle’s case of the tyrant in *NE* III.1. It might be a bad thing “without qualification” to do some (unspecified) shameful action, but in the context of a tyrant threatening to kill your family if you don’t do the unqualifiedly shameful thing, the “most choiceworthy” action may very well be to do as the tyrant bids *for the purpose of saving one’s family*. Though one is involuntarily placed in highly constricted and undesirable circumstances, one voluntarily must choose with *phronesis* the right thing to do in that context for the sake of *eudaimonia*. There is an ultimate principle guiding all moral choices, though it might be difficult to discern which action is the right one, and any sense of regret felt is not of having done something wrong, but of having been placed in undesirable circumstances. As Gottlieb explains, the agent’s rightly chosen “action is praiseworthy, there is no stain on his character, and therefore the type of regret that amounts to self-reproach is out of place” (p. 131). Aristotle’s

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<sup>18</sup> For two prominent hybrid accounts that assume the existence of moral dilemmas in the context of Just War Theory, see Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” in *War and Moral Responsibility*, ed. Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 62-82; Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006); and Thomas Nagel, “War and Massacre,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1972), p. 123-44. Nagel articulates exactly the view that Gottlieb rejects: “Given the limitations on human action, it is naive to suppose that there is a solution to every moral problem with which the world can face us. We have always known that the world is a bad place. It appears that it may be an evil place as well”; see Nagel, “War and Massacre,” p. 144. For an excellent account of how an Aristotelian approach undermines the existence of moral dilemmas and “dirty hands” in the context of Just War Theory, see Irfan Khawaja, “‘Lesser Evils’ and ‘Dirty Hands’: A Response to Asta Maskaliunaite,” *Baltic Security & Defence Review* 10 (2008), pp. 29-52.

<sup>19</sup> A point suggested by Gronroos, “Book Review of Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle’s Ethics*”: “It is of course true that when a moral dilemma is insufficiently specified, one might wonder whether there is a way of disarming the dilemma by considering the situation more carefully. But are there any reasons to believe this always to be the case?”

virtue ethics is thus “more humane” than rival moral theories. This renders it immensely valuable not only in political contexts, but also in the lived texture of everyday life where it is possible on Aristotle’s view for people of integrity to live free of backward-looking anguish over difficult moral choices.

Though there is much of value in Gottlieb’s account, it suffers from a number of significant difficulties. As noted above in the discussion of equilibrium, Gottlieb could have developed more fully the way in which an Aristotelian virtue ethics can justify the selection of virtues in relation to the ultimate good of *eudaimonia*. She shows how Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean can “locate” a virtue where others may not have detected and named one before, but she does not provide an argument that sufficiently explains how the virtues contribute to the flourishing life recommended by Aristotle’s function argument. In other words, she has not yet provided fully objective, universal grounds for why some traits (*hexeis*) are to count as genuine virtues by contributing to the human good, while others do not.

Since Gottlieb does not always limit herself to Aristotle’s text *per se*, but also suggests directions that we can take a “living” virtue ethics, she often discusses contemporary moral theorists whose views bear some similarity to Aristotle’s. In this regard, Gottlieb’s summary dismissal of Ayn Rand’s Aristotelian-inspired Objectivism is at the very least baffling and at most a wrong-headed rejection of a straw man position (pp. 73-74 and 86-87). Gottlieb not only fails to cite Rand’s own works,<sup>20</sup> but attributes to Rand virtues such as “greed” (dismissed as vices) that Rand herself does not endorse.<sup>21</sup> Among the glaring omissions from Gottlieb’s bibliography in this regard is Tara Smith’s *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*.<sup>22</sup> In addition to providing an extensive and sympathetic articulation of Rand’s ethical theory, Smith places Rand’s account of the virtues in dialogue with other contemporary moral theories (especially other varieties of naturalistic virtue ethics). It’s unfortunate that Gottlieb’s discussion of Rand is hasty and

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<sup>20</sup> Gottlieb cites as the source of her understanding of Rand’s views a website of “the followers of Ayn Rand”: <http://www.aynrand.com> (p. 86 n. 26).

<sup>21</sup> See Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), pp. 13-35, where she explicitly endorses seven virtues: rationality, honesty, independence, justice, integrity, productiveness, and pride. Arguably, she endorses a virtue of benevolence as well; see Ayn Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 43-49. Though she refers in her novel *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: New American Library, 1985 [1957]), p. 699, to “the utopia of greed,” both “utopia” and “greed” are obviously meant ironically.

<sup>22</sup> Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For critical discussion, see Carrie-Ann Biondi, “Critical Review Essay of Tara Smith’s *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*,” *Reason Papers* 30 (Winter 2008), pp. 91-105.

uninformed, and that she did not integrate the substantial work of Rand, Smith, and others when articulating and defending Aristotle's virtue ethics.

Another difficulty (or rather, set of difficulties) with Gottlieb's account arises from how she draws out the political implications of Aristotle's virtue ethics. She is right that Aristotle's view of the naturalness of the *polis* is an expression of his non-remedial account of the virtues. She sees the virtues involved in human sociality as most actualized through wide political participation, and argues that Aristotle thus regards the majority rule of polity (*politeia*) as superior to aristocracy or monarchy: "for the more people are involved, the more various their partial vicious tendencies will be, and the more likely it will be that only their virtuous judgments will coalesce" (p. 206).<sup>23</sup> Aristotle regards monarchy (rule by one virtuous person), aristocracy (rule by a small number of virtuous people), and polity (rule by many free persons) to be the only legitimate possibilities for a "correct constitution," that is, one that rules for the common advantage (*Politics* III.7.1279a25-31).

However, Gottlieb's account has two problems. For one thing, as David Keyt explains, she oscillates between discussing Aristotle's conception of polity and our modern conception of democracy, ultimately arguing that some "sort of democratic society" is most supportive of human flourishing—a conclusion that Keyt regards as "a piece of neo-Aristotelianism on Gottlieb's part."<sup>24</sup> Keyt (rightly) argues that Gottlieb refuses to accept "the master's own words" of *Politics* VII, where Aristotle's best constitution is clearly stated as "a true aristocracy where all the mature citizens are men of full virtue."<sup>25</sup> Polity is to be preserved *only* when the circumstances are such that the legislator can expect no better at the time. In addition, many (though not all) Aristotelian virtues can be cultivated through non-political spheres like the family or friendships, so that a polity would not be required for all forms of human flourishing.

Gottlieb qualifies her view by pointing out how Aristotle limits what those in a polity can do: "[T]he people are not to alter the basis of the constitution or its laws and . . . they are [to] have only deliberative and judicial functions" (p. 206). This *is* Aristotle's view of what the citizens in a polity should be allowed to do, which explains why he does not put it higher on the

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Meilaender, "Book Review of Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics*," *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (February 2010), accessed online at: <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2010/2010-02-15.html>, likens this part of Gottlieb's argument to that of James Madison in *Federalist* #51 concerning the benefits of having many factions.

<sup>24</sup> Keyt, "Book Review of Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics*," p. 859.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. I defend a conclusion similar to Keyt's in Carrie-Ann Biondi Khan, "Aristotle, Citizenship, and the Common Advantage," *Polis* 22, no. 1 (2005), pp. 1-23, esp. pp. 12-13 and 20-23; and Carrie-Ann Biondi, "Aristotle on the Mixed Constitution and Its Relevance for American Political Thought," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 176-98, esp. pp. 180-83.

scale of possible correct constitutions: the many free citizens of a polity do not have the virtue requisite for higher levels of political involvement. This qualification also indicates a problem with Gottlieb's discussion of the implications of Aristotle's political thought for the inclusivism-exclusivism debate. Recall that Gottlieb avoids the question of whether the contemplative and/or morally virtuous life is best by saying that it "makes no sense" to "rank" happy lives (p. 196), and that it is up to individuals in a *polis* to decide on an individual basis which life is best for them. However, the legislators in a polity who are responsible for the "constitution and its laws" are the very same ones whom Gottlieb earlier says need more and a higher kind of wisdom than the rest of the population. We should keep in mind that Aristotle states near the beginning of the *NE*, "while it is satisfactory to acquire and preserve the good even for an individual, it is finer and more divine to preserve it for a people and for cities" (I.2.1094b9-11). It sounds like the legislators, who possess *sophia*, live "finer and more divine" lives, and thus are happier, than others.<sup>26</sup> Hence, Gottlieb's own account seems implicitly to warrant an inclusivist interpretation of the best life (perhaps with contemplation as a dominant end), despite her explicit rejection of taking sides on this larger issue. Whether that interpretation is Aristotle's considered view is a complex and important issue, but it is one that Gottlieb does not adequately tackle.

#### 4. Salem's *In Pursuit of the Good: Intellect and Action in Aristotle's Ethics*

Salem launches his project by setting up the tension that emerges when one juxtaposes the first nine books of the *NE*, in which Aristotle discusses the active life of moral virtue as the way to flesh out his conception of happiness, with the startling assertion part way through *NE X* that happiness is contemplation. When we are "forced to call into question the very assumption . . . that happiness lies in action rather than thought" (p. 5), how are we to understand the relationship between *theoria* (thought) and *praxis* (action, or ethical virtues plus *phronesis*)? Salem asks, "Is each of these activities to be regarded as a self-sufficient whole, independent of the other and perhaps incapable of being brought together with it within a single life? Or is the happy life a whole within which both *theoria* and *praxis* play essential parts?" (pp. 46-47). In answering these questions, the issue of "audience" plays as central a role in Salem's interpretive strategy of the *NE* as it does for Burger, though Salem offers a more moderate reading of Aristotle's irony than she does. Ultimately, he concludes that Aristotle affirms that "the happy life [is] a whole within which both *theoria* and *praxis* play essential parts." In so doing, Salem seems unintentionally<sup>27</sup> to combine elements of

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<sup>26</sup> This is probably why Matthew Walker, "Book Review of Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48, no. 3 (July 2010), p. 398, says: "[T]o examine Aristotle fully as a virtue ethicist requires one to say more than Gottlieb does about intellectual virtues other than *phronesis*."

<sup>27</sup> I say "unintentionally," because Salem does not discuss either Burger's or Gottlieb's



Burger's and Gottlieb's views, offering a three-stage argument to reach this conclusion.

In the first stage, Salem dwells in detail on Book I of the *NE* and gleans three significant points. First, he highlights Aristotle's "full definition" of happiness, which clearly calls for an active life of virtue: "Happiness or the human good is an activity of the soul in accordance with the best and most complete virtue, in a complete life" (p. 13). Second, he points out that this emphasis on happiness as a virtuous activity clashes with a previous claim that man's distinctive function is reason: "In the final form of his definition reason is conspicuously absent. What are we to make of this?" (p. 28). Answering his own question, Salem argues that any mention of reason drops out because of the audience Aristotle is addressing: "the cultivated and active" (p. 30). He thinks that if Aristotle were to suggest at this early stage that happiness consisted in the activity of thinking, it "would run counter to human life as they understand it: it would needlessly offend the sense and sensibilities of his closest allies" (p. 29). Third, he analyzes the function argument's connection between *energeia* (activity) and *entelecheia* (completeness) in relation to how Aristotle discusses these terms in his *Metaphysics*. When something is being *what* it is, it is being-at-work-in-the-world, which is its distinctive *energeia*. *Entelecheia* is achieved when something engages *well* in its distinctive activity. For many beings, the two are indistinguishable, but in the case of humans there is "a gap . . . between being merely human and being fully human" (p. 44), and so a deep question arises about what fills the gap between human *energeia* and *entelecheia*. In so doing, Aristotle transforms the search for happiness into asking "what it would mean for me, a human being, to be fully present in the world—to be, for once, *all there*" (p. 43). In other words, we are trying to figure out the best way to exercise our agency in relation to our function (which is presumably what causes "the gap").

The second stage of the argument is guided by Salem's concern with *NE*'s audience. Since this intelligent and honor-loving audience's interests need to be taken seriously, Aristotle spends the time necessary (nine more books) to win them over to the way in which *theoria* will be involved in the best life. Salem employs this somewhat ironic understanding of Aristotle's method in the parts of his book where he discusses select portions of *NE* II-VII (Chapters 2 and 3). He considers in turn whether the virtue that will move humans from their *energeia* to their *entelecheia* is magnanimity, justice, *phronesis*, or *sophia*. In each case, he explains why the candidate virtue fails to meet the criterion of completeness. With respect to the magnanimous man and the wholly just (i.e., equitable) man, their worth is so great that no political activity they engage in could possibly yield to them their full worth or honor, and so there is no way for them to attain completeness in such activities (Chapter 2).

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books in his (though he does list Burger's in his bibliography).

The failure of these first two candidates provides Aristotle with the opportunity to bring back into the picture man's distinctive function of reason and explore *phronesis* and *sophia*. Chapter 3 heightens the tension between these two intellectual virtues, with each offering weighty reasons on its behalf, though *phronesis* ends up being for the sake of *sophia*, and hence is incomplete. Though *sophia* is the last virtue standing, this does not yield the conclusion that happiness is simply a life of contemplation, Salem argues, because there are some unresolved problems here. He questions whether *sophia* can meet the completeness criterion, since while *sophia* "in itself" can "exist apart from a knowledge of human things and the human good," clearly the "wise man" cannot; "the wise man must presumably live and act among other men" (p. 120). Since the wise man must then possess the ethical virtues in order to live and act with others, making it apparent that all of these virtues "express different 'modes' of the same man" (p. 121), the question re-emerges whether he can connect his good with that of the *polis* so as "to find a true place for himself within his city" (p. 122).

In the third stage of his argument, Salem combines a largely straightforward reading of *NE X* with earlier textual hints from the *NE* as well as additional material from *Metaphysics*. Essentially, the happiest human actualizes his reason through both *sophia* and *phronesis* (and by implication of the unity of the virtues, all of the ethical virtues as well), since he attains and maintains *sophia* through *phronesis*. He also has a vested interest in maintaining a good political society and in cultivating others to be the best that they can be for two reasons: (1) doing so helps him to maintain the external conditions needed for exercising *sophia* (pp. 126-28); and (2) doing so enables him to actualize fully his nature and to behold its "being" in the world, much in the way that the benefactor, mother, and friend discussed in *NE VIII-IX* behold that which he or she has co-created (pp. 137-45). It is this second reason that illuminates the role of *theoria* (which at its root means "beholding") in the good life and explains its sudden appearance in Book X: "To study human things as Aristotle does . . . [including] the delightful recognition of 'himself' at work in those things—is to study that part of the whole which reveals most about the source of the whole. For here, too, as it turns out, there are gods" (p. 163).<sup>28</sup>

Salem's argument is similar in some ways to Burger's and Gottlieb's analyses of the intersection between ethics and politics. On the one hand, he highlights the crucial role of the "unnamed virtues" in the good life, as does Gottlieb, and sees them as being useful to the happy person in both leisure and politics. For example, a good use of leisure is to engage in truthfulness, tact, and witty conversation that "reveals the character of the soul" (p. 157). On the other hand, Salem indicates the limits of truthfulness in relation to one's

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<sup>28</sup> Salem here makes reference to a parallel analysis in Aristotle's *Parts of Animals* where he seconds Heraclitus's exaltation of the study of living things: "within all natural things there is present something wondrous" (645a17).

audience. To those incapable of recognizing the best man's full worth, "he will tell the truth except when speaking about himself. In this case, he will be inclined to understate the truth, to be 'ironic' about his own virtue, thus exhibiting a kind of equity in speech" (p. 157). He shares Burger's view that through the *NE* Aristotle "enacts a final resolution of the tension between *theoria* and *praxis*" (p. 161) and employs an ironic technique in order to reach his target audience, "affirming the intrinsic worthiness of the ethical life and pointing beyond it" (p. 159). Unlike Burger, though, and more like Gottlieb,<sup>29</sup> Salem thinks that for those who love *sophia*, a careful reading of Aristotle's *NE*—taken with his metaphysical and biological works—reveals an internally consistent argument for the best life.

I will not repeat here my position set out above in Section 2 for why I find an ironic reading of the *NE* generally unwarranted, but would take issue with Salem's "evidence" for thinking that Aristotle takes an ironic strategy toward his audience of "cultivated and active" men and "conceals" his definition of happiness. Salem argues that reference to reason drops out of the function argument in *NE* I only to reappear much later when the audience will no longer be scared off by it, having gone through and found wanting the honor-related virtues. I concur with Michael Pakaluk in finding problematic Salem's "evidence" for his "dynamic" or "dramatic" reading of most of the *NE*. With respect to reason's supposedly dropping out of the conclusion of Aristotle's function argument, Pakaluk poses the good question, "Why should someone latch onto the definition [of happiness], and not attend to what Aristotle had openly said three lines earlier, to justify that definition?"<sup>30</sup> Anyone reading or listening to this discussion would have followed the logical moves that implicitly place reason in the conclusion of the function argument; hence, it never drops out for an audience paying attention to the context. In addition, Aristotle reiterates at a number of places throughout the *NE* that reason plays a key role in the good life. It just takes longer to explain fully *how* reason and *theoria* are involved in *eudaimonia*, given that reason is closer to the first-principles end of the journey toward first principles than it is to us at "the beginning" of our ethical inquiry.

Pakaluk refers to the problem raised in the previous paragraph as one concerning Salem's "method." He also raises a problem for the "manner" in which Salem proffers his interpretation of the *NE* by pointing out that Salem "does not take the most basic care to support his interpretation by defending it in relation to reasonable alternatives" and that there seems to be no evidence

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<sup>29</sup> I say only "more like Gottlieb" because she spends little time discussing *sophia* and explicitly dodges the issue of which kind of life is best. What Salem shares most with Gottlieb is that his account is best when it takes a straightforward reading of the *NE*.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Pakaluk, "Book Review of Eric Salem, *In Pursuit of the Good: Intellect and Action in Aristotle's Ethics*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (April 2010), accessed online at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24324-in-pursuit-of-the-good-intellect-and-action-in-aristotle-s-ethics/>.

that Salem “has consulted scholarship on Aristotle’s *Ethics* post 1996.”<sup>31</sup> Not consulting any scholarship relevant to one’s project during the fourteen-year period prior to publication of one’s project is a significant omission, but it is more problematic to ignore competing interpretations that might make more sense than one’s preferred (though implausible) interpretation. Pakaluk rightfully takes Salem to task on both counts. However, Pakaluk is unfair when he claims that Salem’s “dynamic” reading “leads him astray” to such an extent that he ends up giving “no illuminating accounts of any distinctions, classifications, lines of reasoning or arguments in *NE*.”<sup>32</sup>

If we set aside the difficulties involved in the “manner and method” of Salem’s project, I think we find that (*contra* Pakaluk) Salem has a fairly straightforward reading of (most of) *NE* I and X that is nuanced, substantial, and superior to that of Burger or Gottlieb. On the most pressing issues of the nature of the best life and how to attain it, Salem delves deeply into Aristotle’s corpus and brings forth an insightful interpretation for us to consider. The material Salem offers at the end of Chapter 1, which enriches our understanding of the function argument by way of the concepts *energeia* and *entelecheia* found in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, is excellent. Locating the central issue of ethical inquiry in “the gap” between *energeia* and *entelecheia* allows us to appreciate how systematic and complex Aristotle’s developmental account of virtue ethics is. This also clarifies the general outline of ethical inquiry, which Aristotle thinks can only be fleshed out through lived experience and in conversation with “fellow lovers of wisdom” (p. 8).

The most rewarding insight that Salem offers us in *In Pursuit of the Good*, though, comes in Chapter 4 where he synthesizes his analysis of *NE* X with relevant passages from a few of Aristotle’s other works: to bring out the best in others is to see the best in oneself made concrete. For embodied intellects like us, it is essential to express reason through virtuous action so as to actualize our natures. In showing the range of solitary through social activities that the actualized, happy person could experience (as craftsman, benefactor, parent, friend, citizen), Salem provides a more complete picture than either Burger or Gottlieb of how such a person lives a whole, integrated life that manifests aspects of *theoria* and *praxis*—contemplation and moral virtue—at the same time.

## 5. Conclusion

Taken together, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, *The Virtue of Aristotle’s Ethics*, and *In Pursuit of the Good*—despite their many differences—offer us the following insights about Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. (1) The best human life is “inclusive,” that is, it consists of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

contemplation and moral virtue. (2) Reason—as the essential faculty by which we deliberate about, recognize, and appreciate the human good—has pride of place in the good life. (3) As physically, emotionally, and intellectually integrated beings at our best, there is no good reason to treat rationality and morality as entirely distinct sources of normativity.

Aristotle's virtue ethics, as articulated in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and understood in the context of his corpus, thus provides us with an alternative vision of the self that is at once complex and realistic, aspirational and within reach. For philosophers wanting to avoid the rationalism of deontology and the subjectivism of utilitarianism, virtue ethics promises a refreshing and plausible alternative. For citizens weary of the misdeeds of politicians and other leaders, Aristotle offers objective grounds by which they can hold their social and political leaders accountable. It's no surprise, then, that professional philosophers and laypersons alike continue to turn to Aristotle's theory when other theoretical options and ways of living fail to yield satisfactory answers to life's most important questions.

