



Rationality, Virtue and Practical Wisdom in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to study the interrelatedness of rationality, virtue, and practical wisdom in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* by offering a critical interpretation of the bipartition of the soul presented in Chap. 13 of the first book. Aristotle relies on the partition of the soul into a rational and a non-rational part when he distinguishes between ethical and intellectual virtues. The paper will question the adequacy of these divisions and show that Aristotle himself casts doubt on them while leaving open the possibility of understanding the soul in an alternative way which will prove to fit better with his own exposition of deliberate choice and the integration of virtuous action and practical wisdom.

Keywords Virtue · Rational · Non-rational · Practical wisdom · Aristotle

1 Introduction

Towards the end of the first book of *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*), right after having advanced the division of the soul into two parts, a rational (*to logon*) and a non-rational part (*to alogon*), Aristotle advocates that the virtues be categorised according to the same bipartition: The ethical virtues (*aretai ēthikai*), such as courage and temperance, often also called character virtues, belong to the non-rational side of the soul, whereas the so-called intellectual virtues (*aretai dianoētikai*), paradigmatically represented by practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), spring from the other side of the soul, rational thinking proper (Aristotle 2014, 20 (EN I, 13, 1102 b-1103 a)).¹

Many scholars take this to be two uncontroversial divisions. Jessica Moss has named it “the standard reading of the ethical works” which she defends based on the strong textual evidence in favour of it. As she argues: “if Aristotle in fact thinks character-virtue in part intellectual then the

ethical works’ whole project of contrasting intellectual virtues, acquired through teaching, with ethical ones, acquired through habituation, is awkward, misleading, and incomplete” (Moss 2012, 165). In another text, Moss follows up on this assertion and declares that “to doubt the fixity of these distinctions is to accuse Aristotle of systematically misleading his readers” (Moss 2014, 227), perhaps especially the readers of the *Eudemian Ethics* in which the separation of *to logon* and *to alogon* is emphasised even more.

Even though the following reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* will cast doubt on the fixity of these conceptual distinctions, its objective is not, nor does it follow from its critical approach, that it will expose Aristotle's project or himself as being misleading. Another thing is, and this is one of Moss' other worries, that the bipartition of the soul into a non-rational and a rational part and the subsequent distinction between ethical and intellectual virtues, which is modelled on the former division, may prove to be incomplete. Could it be that the divisions proposed by Aristotle contain or lead to certain conceptual problems which call for a more thorough investigation of rationality, virtue, and practical wisdom?

The purpose of the paper is to undertake such an investigation with a specific focus on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In his interpretation of this most cited work of Aristotle, Joseph Dunne has pointed to what can arguably be considered one of the central problems emerging out of the divisions previously mentioned: “Indeed, with *phronesis* the

¹ The first reference is to C. D. C. Reeve's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The second reference is to the version of the original text, edited by L. Bywater.

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whole distinction between intellectual and ethical virtues becomes strained”. As Dunne goes on to explain, the distinction in question becomes strained, “[F]or while phronesis is a virtue of the rational part of the soul (the *logistikon*), which gives direction to the nonrational part (which is *alogon*), still this virtue can exist in the rational part only if the nonrational part is already inclined to the ethical virtues” (Dunne 1993, 275).

In the first part of the paper, the origin of the uneasy tension between ethical and intellectual virtues will be traced back to the bipartition of the soul which Aristotle endorses in part, while still leaving open certain questions as to the exact composition and functioning of the human psyche. An important part of the investigation proposed is to elaborate an answer to these questions by extracting another understanding of the soul from Chap. 13 of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This other understanding does not rely on bipartition but on the mutually inclusive relation between two closely connected aspects of rationality, namely to listen and to speak. In the second part of the paper, i.e. Section 3, this other understanding of the soul will lead the way into a critical reflection and discussion of the two forms of virtues, intellectual and ethical respectively, of which *phronēsis* is supposedly comprised. Rather than viewing the two different forms of virtues as merely interacting together, the paper will argue that Aristotle sees them as becoming integrated in such a way that the one does not come into being and work well without the other, prefiguring a sort of psychic integration that can best be explained through the other understanding of the soul presented in the first part.

2 Division of the soul

2.1 On the Rational and the Non-rational Part of the Soul

In Chap. 13 of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sums up his discussion of the principal topics which he has touched upon and will continue to elaborate on throughout his main work on ethics: “happiness (*eudaimonia*) is some activity (*energeia*) of the soul in accord with complete virtue” (Aristotle 2014, 18 (EN I, 13, 1102 a 5–6)). The aim, which he sets himself, is to explore ways for humans to achieve happiness and live a good life so that they can benefit from these reflections and become virtuous themselves. As the ethical pathways which lead into a good life are located within the political sphere, according to Aristotle, it should be part of a statesman’s assignment to help promote the virtues of the citizens. Again, as the virtues are features of the soul, not of the body, Aristotle concludes

that a statesman should also have some grasp of the soul (Aristotle 2014, 19 (EN I, 13, 1102 a 7–23)).

Yet, which knowledge of the soul should the statesman rely on? Immediately after having addressed the statesman, Aristotle introduces the notion of the human soul consisting of two parts, one rational and the other non-rational. The somewhat sketchy way, in which he presents this notion, should not go unnoticed.² First, he remarks that, given the political context of the statesman and his grasp of things, the account of the soul “should be for the sake of the things in question and of an extent that is adequate to the things being looked for”. To which he adds: “since a more exact treatment is perhaps harder work than the topics before us require” (Aristotle 2014, 19 (EN I, 13, 1102 a 23–26)). Secondly, he goes on to mention that he will draw on some “external” or “exoteric” accounts for his explanation of the different parts of the soul.³ These will suffice, he claims, making it clear one more time that an exhaustive explanation may not be necessary.

Aristotle could hardly be more explicit about his reluctance to give a full account of the soul. We shall see if he is right that less will suffice, but in so far as this is what he intends to say, it should be clear that in this context he does not offer a complete and detailed exposition of the intricacies of the soul. What he states about the two parts of the soul after having referred to the exoteric accounts confirms this reading: “Whether these are distinguished like the parts of the body or like anything else that is divisible or whether they are two in definition (*tōi logoi*) but inseparable by nature (like convex and concave in a curved surface) makes no difference for present purposes” (Aristotle 2014, 19 (EN I, 13, 1102 a 28–31)).

As I have pointed out elsewhere, considering the important implications which the bipartition of the soul has for Aristotle’s whole project in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it arguably makes a difference whether the parts are separable like the parts of the body, or whether they are distinguishable only in account but “inseparable by nature” (Holst 2018). Even though Aristotle leaves this question open here, which again goes to show that his intention is not to give a full account, he has already affirmed earlier on, as we saw, in the passage where he addresses the statesman, that virtue concerns the soul, not the body, and so if the soul consisted of parts like the body, it would become difficult to distinguish between the two and even harder to reserve virtue for the

² It has not gone unnoticed. Kamtekar (2006, 170) calls Aristotle’s account of the soul in his ethical works “too sketchy”, and Pakaluk (2005, 94) speaks of his “minimalist psychology” in Chap. 13 of the first book.

³ Regarding these *exōterikois logois*, we are left in the dark about which accounts Aristotle refers to. We do not even know if they were written by him. They could be, but we cannot say for sure.

soul. Now, regarding those who are not virtuous, their souls do not consist of visibly separate parts either, as Aristotle observes shortly after: “In the case of the body, to be sure, we see the part that is moving in the wrong direction (*parapheromenon*), whereas in the case of the soul we do not see it. But presumably we should nonetheless acknowledge that in the soul as well there is something besides reason (*ti paraton logon*), countering it and going against it. How it is different, though, is not important” (Aristotle 2014, 20 (EN I, 13, 1102 b 21–24).

Again, Aristotle downplays the importance of determining the nature of the other part of the soul which counters and goes against reason. That this part is “other” with respect to reason can be read off a sentence preceding the passage quoted above, in which Aristotle again locates reason’s counterpart next to reason in people with and without self-control: “But they also have by nature something else within them besides reason (*allo ti paraton logon*), apparently, which fights against reason and resists it” (Aristotle 2014, 20 (EN I, 13, 1102 b 16–18). As already stated by Aristotle, how it fights and goes against reason is not visible to the human eye. This makes its exact location difficult to define. Does this mean that it could not be separated from reason in the way in which the parts of the body can be separated? No, it does not. One could imagine that in a person who lacks self-control, the two main parts of the soul would somehow come apart in ways which might jeopardize the unity of the soul.

Yet, this imaginary example does not seem to reflect Aristotle’s position. When affirming that we praise the reason of the one who has self-control, he also includes the one who lacks self-control, in so far as this person has not become completely irrational and lost the chance of keeping within bounds. In both cases, reason “exhorts (*parakalei*) them correctly toward what is best”, and in this sense the “other natural constituent of the soul”, which is non-rational, “shares in reason in a way”. Notwithstanding this partial share in reason, the one who lacks self-control does not follow reason’s “command”, precisely because of a lack of self-constraint, whereas the person with enough self-control will “obey” (*peitharchei*)” reason: “Furthermore, that of a temperate and courageous person, presumably, listens still better (*euēkoōteron*), since there it chimes (*homophōnei*) with reason in everything” (Aristotle 2014, 19–20 (EN I, 13, 1102 b 15–28).⁴

⁴ In his eloquent reading of this passage, Jonathan Lear calls attention to the Greek verb *homophōnei* which should not, he argues, be translated with “chime”, as it means “to speak with the same voice”. Lear is surely right in pointing this out, but, as he himself notes, *phōnei* denotes for Aristotle the voice, human or non-human, which “need not be endowed with *logos*” (Lear 2017, 31). This raises at least two questions: To which degree does the non-rational part qua non-rational speak and enter into dialogue with reason, as Lear claims, and

All three persons, the one who lacks self-control, the one with this ability and the virtuous person, have their share in reason, but they have it in various degrees and respond to it differently. How the virtuous may be better able to listen to reason is not something Aristotle goes into in this chapter. We shall return to this question later. Before we can do so adequately, other crucial questions regarding the link between the rational and nonrational parts need to be answered: How is it possible that something which is, in principle, non-rational can partake and share in reason? Would it not require that it already carried within itself some form of rationality? Aristotle uses the metaphor that it shares in reason by listening and obeying, but the same question arises again: Does listening to rational speech and responding to it adequately not presuppose that the part listening and obeying already contains, at least potentially, some sort of rational capacity?

Without answering these questions directly, Aristotle is aware that he needs to open a line of communication between the two parts of the soul in order to lay a foundation for ethics which can explain both the integrity and wholeness of the happy and virtuous and the possible frictions and fractures within the souls of those who are neither happy nor virtuous. In his endeavor to create a passage between the two parts of the soul, he begins by excluding the nutritive part of the soul, which is non-rational and takes care of basic biological processes, such as nutrition, growth and sleep, from having any share in reason and virtue. Then, he singles out another part of the non-rational side, which is the one with some share in reason, and he declares this part to be the appetitive and desiring part as a whole (*to d’ epithymētikon kai holōs orektikon*): “It has reason (*echein logon*), then, in the way we are said to have the reason of our fathers and friends and not in the way we are said to have that of mathematics” (Aristotle 2014, 19–20 (EN I, 13, 1102 b 12 29–33).

Here, we should again be careful with the translation. Every interpreter faces the arduous task of reproducing a sentence which has been dubbed “untranslatable” by some philologists.⁵ If we read the sentence, as it stands, then Aristotle does not say that “it”, i.e. the non-rational part, has reason, but that “we say that having reason” can be understood in the sense of listening to our father and our friends, but not like in mathematics. What Aristotle seems to be getting at with the last example is that the sort of reasons and proofs presented in mathematics follow rigorous forms of logical deduction, according to which there is no room or only very little room for wants and desires and for deliberating about

presupposing that it can speak, could it do so independently of reason or only because it is backed up by or imbued with reason in the truly virtuous? We shall deal with these questions in what follows.

⁵ See Long 2020, 37–38, for a comment on the philological difficulties of this sentence.

how to act. If desire and deliberation play no significant role in mathematical reasoning, then the mathematical form of *logos* is irrelevant for ethics. It is a different story, however, when we are thrown into real life situations, where things constantly change, and we desire certain events to happen while deliberating about options that can be better or worse for ourselves and others. Then we find ourselves in the sort of situations with which ethics is concerned, as Aristotle states in the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* after having briefly delimited ethical action (Aristotle 2014, 22 (EN II, 2, 1104 a 3–4)).

With respect to the father and the friends as examples of people who we would listen to, Aristotle does not say why he chooses them, but they appear to have a significance which goes beyond merely standing in for other people. If we take into account that Aristotle employs “obey” and “obeying an authority” (*peitharchein*) several times in Chap. 13 of the first book to describe how the non-rational part relates to reason and, moreover, that he holds the father to be the governing authority in the house and men the leading authorities in society, it makes sense that the father is used as an example for a ruler. The father even seems to become the paradigmatic example of how reason rules over the desires in the soul, as he is the only one mentioned in the final lines of Chap. 13. Yet, what about the friends? What happens to them?

This may seem less important, and almost nobody has taken notice of them. Most scholars interpreting this passage centers on the father, who also appears to be the most important figure for Aristotle. Later we shall return to the friends and see what implications it could have if they became the paradigmatic example of having and listening to reason. The fact that it is the father, who remains in the foreground, could explain why so many interpreters concentrate exclusively on the non-rational part taking on the role of the obedient child complying by the fatherly reasons (Pakaluk 2005, 93; Sokolon 2006, 13; Lorenz 2007, 189; Burger 2008, 42–43). There is plenty of textual support for this reading which sees in the “warnings” and “exhortations” of reason the sort of rule effectuated by the rational part over the non-rational part.

We must not forget though that if we hold onto the model of the soul with *to logon* and *to alogon* on either side and a passage between them, then we should be clear that they form parts of one soul. Aristotle divides each of the two parts into two further parts which makes it problematical to compare each of them to individuals like a father and a child. Nancy Sherman has commented on this problem by arguing that a child of a certain age will understand and possibly also offer counterarguments in a dialogue with its father. Yet, this is not the role Aristotle assigns to the non-rational part in the form of desire which may not fit into a

clear-cut bipartition of the soul: “Desire (*orexis*) is considerably more complex than the division of the soul into rational and non-rational parts suggests” (Sherman 1989, 163).

In *De anima*, Aristotle argues against dividing the soul into parts that are separable in size and place, and he deems the division of the perceptive capacity into separable parts to be questionable and the possible division of the desiderative capacity futile (Aristotle 1993, p. 188–89 (DA 3.9, 432a-b)). In relation to the bipartition of the soul in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Grönroos has insisted that one should understand the analogy with the father as a description of somebody being warned against what is bad and being led toward the noble or the good by an authority, like “bringing up children, in which the child understands and accepts a command on mere authority without knowing the considerations in favour of it” (Grönroos 2007, 259; cf. Lorenz 2007, 189). Although understanding and following a command does not necessarily involve knowing the reasons why, understanding still entails some receptivity to rationality in the form of listening which can hardly be reduced to blind obedience. As we have seen, Aristotle talks about the non-rational part being obedient, but he also makes room for the non-rational part listening and being persuaded by reason which is not the same as merely complying. If all the rational part does in a person with self-control is, as Grönroos sustains, “to force the non-rational part into obedience”, then reason becomes, in effect, reduced to force and can hardly be said to persuade anymore. It can, of course, come to this, i.e. that reason needs to use force, especially if the non-rational part puts up a fight and strives forcefully against it, but once we reach that point, it is doubtful if reason can resolve the tension by rational or reasonable means.

This also seems to be what Grönroos claims: Neither in the person with self-control nor in the virtuous does persuasion and listening depend directly on reasoning. To this, one could ask which role reason has if it is not to employ its own most cherished resource, and how the process of making the non-rational part obey differs from making an animal obey? Grönroos asserts that reason directs spiritous desire toward the noble through encouragement and appeals to its sense of shame by way of admonishment or punishment (Grönroos 2007, 265–266), but, as Long has shown, encouraging and admonishing also entail reasoning processes in other of Aristotle’s works (Long 2022, 61). Moreover, the virtuous, who listen still better to reason, are no longer exposed, if they ever have been, to this form of internal persuasion through admonishments or warnings. They are free from such potential conflict and act and think qualitatively different than anybody who is merely obedient. For Aristotle, the way in which reason engages with its “other partner” seems to come down to the degree of habituation and receptivity which it displays, and so reason can offer a range of

reasonable “speeches”, some imbued with reason, while others may merely draw attention to something valuable without offering any explicit reasons.

Having said this, we should still remember that these “speeches” take place within one person so that the range of reasonableness which a person disposes of does not only depend on reason itself, but as much on its other “partner”. Lear has drawn attention to how easy it is, especially due to the predominance of this idea in Western philosophy, “to imagine reason as a thoughtful but isolated monarch, tucked up in the castle thinking through what is best, with unruly desires pounding at the gates for satisfaction”. A more demanding task would consist in elucidating what happens when reason becomes familiar “with the other parts of the soul”, as it is then “not just discovering what these other parts of the soul are like; it is discovering what its own proper activity consists in” (Lear 2017, 2).

In the following section, we shall take one step further in this direction and claim that for reason to function well, it needs the faculties of perception and desire. Being related to these faculties is for reason not only about discovering its own activity, but its own activity is jeopardized if it is not connected to them in the right way. Returning to the Aristotelian example which Lear also has in mind, if what tends to go against reason primarily follows its own nature, which is grounded in desire and the senses, it will be less receptive to reasonable speech and may disperse itself in different contradictory impulses. On the other hand, without any contact to its “sensible” counterpart, reason could also become less reasonable in the sense that it may get stuck in its own competing arguments and lose contact with its surroundings (de Sousa 1990, 16).

Aristotle also underscores the inability of rational thought to set anything in motion on its own: “Thought (*dianoia*) by itself, however, moves nothing” (Aristotle 2014, 99 (EN VI, 2, 1139 a 35)). If the two central parts of the soul depend on each other in various ways to function and, especially, to function well, then Aristotle’s bipartition of the soul is arguably not the most adequate model to use when defining what it means to integrate the two “parts” of the soul nor does bipartition solve, as he himself underlines in *De anima* ((Aristotle 1995, 68–69, 188–89 (DA 2.2, 413b; 3.9, 432a–b)), the *aporias* concerning the inner workings of human rationality.

2.2 On the Other Part Besides Reason

If we choose not to endorse Aristotle’s bipartition of the soul in *Nicomachean Ethics* and his other ethical works because of the problems which it entails, what other options and resources do Aristotle offer if we wish to arrive at a clearer conception of the psychological preconditions and

the ethical practicality of virtue and practical wisdom? If we return to the passage, in which Aristotle singles out one constituent which is somehow able to listen to and be persuaded by reason, he states twice, employing the preposition *para*, that it is to be found besides or next to reason: *ti para ton logon*. It is true that he maintains that it is non-rational, but could this be, because it originates outside reason and does not always cohere with it, and so he chooses to assign it to the only other part in the bipartite model?

As we have seen in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle associates the part capable of listening to and obeying reason with the appetitive and the desiderative part, whose complexity Sherman has pointed to. This complexity manifests itself in Aristotle’s exposition in that desire shows up on the side of reason when it follows its call, but when it resists and goes against reason, it appears to be more nonrational than rational. It is, in other words, a dynamic phenomenon which can hardly be tied down once for all to any of the two sides of the bipartite model. The main reason why Aristotle still classifies desire under the non-rational domain is probably because desire does not give reasons for its own motions or whatever else it sets or omits to set in motion. In this sense, it does not possess reason proper and can therefore not give any reasons either.

Yet, Aristotle lets it have a share in reason due to its capacity to listen to reason, but this seems to presuppose, as we have commented on, that desire is already attuned to reason in some way which is, in fact, what Aristotle asserts with respect to the virtuous. In their case, desire comes so close to reason that it no longer seems to belong to a different category, and it can even come to speak with the same voice as reason. According to Aristotle, a certain overlap between desire and reason already takes place in deliberation and even more so in decision in which the two central parts of the soul interact: Deliberation involves thinking about ways to reach a specific goal which is set by the sensitive and emotionally orientated character of each person. Seen like this, the deliberation process is carried out by the calculative part of reason which in the process of deliberating keeps contact with the other listening part of the soul, particularly the part that wishes for the good or the apparent good. Through this contact with wish the calculative part keeps in mind the aim of the future action. In the decision which ensues from deliberation, wish, which is a rational form of desire, combines with calculation through discernment and judgment so that one course of action is favoured over another (Aristotle 2014, 42 (EN III, 4, 1113 a 2–12)). Yet, as noticed by one commentator, who tries hard to follow every step of Aristotle’s argumentation and make sense of the whole decision process: “Aristotle wavers about how to categorize choice” which he “alternatively calls [...] reasoned desire and desiring reason” (Bobzien 2014, 93).

The fact that desire and reason interact and become “inextricably connected” (Charles 2015: 79), as David Charles has put it⁶, in every human decision process does not automatically mean that they are integrated well. In non-virtuous persons without self-control the desiring part does not listen well to the calculative part, a glitch which will provoke greater or lesser disorder in deliberation and decision making. Still, this failure in internal communication, which could also sometimes be caused by the calculative part, does not make Aristotle say that the two fall apart or fall into pieces. They still go together, but compared to the virtuous they produce a worse state. The collaboration of the two parts in every human being, who is a “starting point (*archē*)”, i.e. desiring reason and reasoning desire (Aristotle 2014, 99 (EN VI, 2, 1139 b 5), could make us look for another conception of the soul which avoids bipartition.

In the passage from Chap. 13 of the first book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he introduces the distinction between *to logon* and *to alogon*, Aristotle also mentions in passing another possible representation of the soul consisting of convex and concave in a curved surface. As we know, Aristotle refrains from thinking further about this representation and the otherness of the non-rational part. Paula Gottlieb has found the representation “suggestive” when applied to the soul of the virtuous, who not only possess equal parts of ethically sensible motivation and intellectually sane thoughtfulness “they cannot have either side properly without the other, just as one cannot have the convex without the concave. (Gottlieb 2009, 105)” Gottlieb goes on to quote from the last book of *Nicomachean Ethics* to show that Aristotle had a keen awareness of what she calls “the integration of the soul”: “Practical wisdom is yoked to virtue of character, and it to practical wisdom, since the starting points of practical wisdom are in accordance with ethical virtues and the correctness of ethics is in accordance with practical wisdom. (Gottlieb 2009, 105–106)”.

For those, who have still not reached this level of virtuosity, where practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and virtuous character (*tēi tou ēthous aretēi*) become intertwined, could the image of the two figures in a curved surface, mutually including each other and sharing the same intersecting line, also prove to be a better representation of their souls than the one which separates the parts in two? If we return once again to Aristotle’s description of those who have and lack self-control, we remember that he describes the struggle

taking place inside their souls, but he does not say that their psyche falls into two clearly separable halves. In the passage, in which he advances these two persons as examples, he describes reason as exhorting or encouraging (*parakalei*) the other part of the soul toward the best. The verb *parakalei* is quite common in ancient Greek, and Aristotle employs it as a substantive shortly after, where he takes exhortations or encouragements (*paraklēsis*) to be proof enough that the other part of the soul, i.e. desire, is “in a way persuaded by reason”. The prefix *para* in *parakalei* indicates that reason does not call from somewhere distant, as if it were located on some other side of the soul than where desire is, but it is at the side of the desiderative capacity which should no longer be categorized as non-rational in so far as it is receptive to reason.

If we look at the soul from the side of desire in those who lack self-control, how does Aristotle describe their actions? When they decide to move in one direction, Aristotle remarks, their impulses carry them away (*parapheretai*) in the opposite direction. Although this opposition within the soul is not observable, Aristotle compares it to someone who is paralytic (*paralelymena*) and does not move because of the stalemate provoked by the opposing forces inside that person. The analogy with the paralytic may not convey exactly what Aristotle wants to say, given that the soul and its motions are not observable like those of the body, but what is worth noticing is that Aristotle repeatedly uses words with the prefix *para* which can both mean besides and opposite to. The example with the paralytic could be read as a bodily manifestation of a state, in which a person is not exactly divided, but he or she experiences contrary drives or impulses and is, in this sense, somehow besides him or herself.

It is right before this passage that Aristotle observes that in the soul of those with and without self-control there seems to be something else besides reason (*allo ti para ton logon*). This observation makes even more sense now that we have highlighted Aristotle’s attempts to describe the activities taking place between desire and reason. He carefully adds “somehow”, “in a way” or “presumably” to indicate that neither he nor possibly anyone else is on firm ground when trying to delineate the motions of the soul. Although he does not expand on what we could call the paralogical structure of the soul, it can be coherently integrated with what he states about both the virtuous and the ones with and without self-control who all listen to reason, but in different ways and therefore also achieving different results.

Furthermore, and this constitutes a more speculative afterthought, the image of the convex and the concave in a curved surface describes a structure in which the two parts are next to each other and could not exist and thus not function without each other, whereas the division of the

⁶ Charles 2015 chooses a different path through Aristotle’s works to build a similar argument as the one presented in this paper: He demonstrates how desire and reason become aligned in the virtuous soul when it grasps the attractiveness of a noble goal and acts in accordance with its theoretical perception. In his own interpretation, Charles exemplifies what he calls the Third View which is opposed to the two component account of the soul, deliberate choice and practical and theoretical knowledge.

soul into a rational and non-rational part appear to consist of two halves which exclude each other, and they could, in principle, exist without each other, although not in humans. In *De anima*, Aristotle prefers the parallel structure of the convex and the concave as a representation of how movement originates in the combined effort of practical reason and desire (Aristoteles 1995, 194–197 (DA 3.10, 433b)), whereas in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he appears to settle for bipartition while still leaving open the question of the exact arrangement of the soul. The conclusion of this section is that Aristotle's suggestion that the soul and its two interconnected "parts", desire and intellect, could be composed of a sort of paralogical structure, fits better with his own account of what happens inside the souls of those who are virtuous and of those who have and lack self-control.

3 Virtue and Practical Wisdom

Before we focus specifically on how Aristotle conceives the relationship between virtuous action and practical wisdom, it may be worth recalling that he construes this relationship conceptually with the bipartition of the soul as the guiding model. At the beginning of the second book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, he explains the separation of the ethical virtues from the intellectual virtues by claiming that in contrast to the latter virtues, which rely mostly on teaching, the former virtues have their origin in habit. Notwithstanding the clarity of this distinction, it can hardly be upheld, as there usually also goes some teaching into consolidating ethical virtues, or teaching is at least not foreign to but rather complementary to habituation. Aristotle is careful to say that teaching is mostly applied to the intellectual virtues, which leaves some room for teaching in relation to the ethical virtues, and we could add that for Aristotle an intellectual virtue, such as *phronēsis*, feeds into and is itself sustained by ethical virtues.

In the standard reading of *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is supported by Aristotle's own distinctions, *phronēsis* is the virtue of the calculative part of reason, and the ethical virtues are well-ordered dispositions of character. Acting virtuously relies on an internal balance between too much and too little according to an intermediate state. What Aristotle does not explain to his readers in his exposition of the ethical virtues in books II to V is that this intermediate virtuous disposition is upheld in collaboration with *phronēsis*. He waits until book VI to appoint *phronēsis* to be the intellectual virtue in charge of giving the right reason (*orthon logon*) in consonance with the demands and reasonable courses of action in each situation. However, in order to apply this sensibility to each situation, *phronēsis* cannot depend or count merely on its own rational resources; *phronēsis* "is not a

state involving reason only" (Aristotle 2014, 102 (EN VI, 5, 1140 b 28)), but it is also a "sense" (*aisthēsis*) and perception of the ultimate particulars ((Aristotle 2014, 106 (EN VI, 8, 1140 b 27–29)), "an eye of the soul" which "does not come about without virtue" (Aristotle 2014, 111 (EN VI, 12, 1144 a 29–30)). It endows the practically wise person with a clear, detailed vision or insight into what is to be done in the best possible way according to the right time, the right things, in relation to the right people, and for the sake of what should be done (Aristotle 2014, 28 (EN II, 6, 1106 b 21–22)).

Some scholars view Aristotle's stipulation of these parameters of good action as a considerable improvement of his explanation of ethical virtues as intermediate states between too much and too little (Brown 2014, 74). When Aristotle amplifies his explanation in book VI by locating the source of right reason and situational sensibility in *phronēsis*, it becomes an even more important advancement which does not, however, make the initial explanation of the balancing achievement of the ethical virtues completely obsolete. Being a capacity which reasons, *phronēsis* plays its part in keeping the soul internally in balance through different forms of guidance, as we have seen, but it also empowers a person to deliberate well about the right ways to act. Although conceptually distinguishable, these two roles, internal guidance and good deliberation, reflect two interdependent sides of virtuous action which is not completed by *phronēsis* alone, but the ethical virtues play the other complementary part in practice without which *phronēsis* could not perform well.

This is brought out in an example of an ethical virtue which Aristotle views as safeguarding *phronēsis*: Temperance (*sōphrosynē*) is "what preserves practical wisdom (*sōzousan tēn phronēsin*)" (Aristotle 2014, 102 (EN VI, 5, 1140 b 11–12)), he asserts apparently employing a word play in Greek. What he understands by this temperate preservation of practical wisdom is clarified in his subsequent explanation which has to do with pleasure and pain: Temperance secures the right measure of these two highly unstable and uncontrollable phenomena, whose impact can be destructive of even the best part of humans, in this case *phronēsis*. As Aristotelian ethics always pursues middle states between extremes, a flawless management of pleasure and pain is key to achieving a virtuous and good life which constitutes, as we know, the end goal of ethics. Temperance provides such a management based on a measured disposition or "a medial state" (*mesōs*) toward basic and immediate forms of pleasure which the temperate person cherishes "in the way the correct reason prescribes" (Aristotle 2014, p. 55 (EN III, 11, 1119 a 11–20)).

Again, it becomes clear from Aristotle's exposition that practical wisdom and ethical virtue presuppose and include each other in a reciprocal structure, within which neither of

the two can deliver on all the parameters required to live a good life. Temperance may safeguard practical wisdom and adjust the practical aim of keeping the balance between too much and too little pleasure and pain, but it is up to practical wisdom to think through the way to reach this goal within the broader horizon of the good life (Aristotle 2014, p. 101 (EN VI, 5, 1140 a 25–28)). Although it is debatable to which degree *phronēsis* is guided by the broadest possible comprehension of a whole life, it does not pertain to any single ethical virtue to deliberate well and offer a detailed contextualization of the actions to be taken. This is the prescriptive function of *phronēsis* which makes it possible to see a connection between certain virtues, in so far as the temperate in certain situations will have to be truthful and friendly when turning down, for example, somebody who keeps offering more food and drinks. That the virtues include each other in this way has been called the interdependence within virtues (Russell 2021, 11), and Aristotle even goes as far as to claim that possessing practical wisdom entails having every other ethical virtue. It falls outside the scope of this paper to deal with this controversial claim which Aristotle almost does not expound on.

The interdependence within virtues, which means that they or some of them imply each other, stands in opposition to atomist theories of virtue, which leave out *phronēsis*' integrative vision of interrelated virtues, and hierarchical views of practical wisdom, which privileges reason over desire without leaving room for the latter to contribute anything to the former's rule (De Caro et al. 2021). By comparing reason to a father who makes the desiderative faculty obey through warnings and exhortations, Aristotle appears to build his understanding of the soul in *Nicomachean Ethics* on a hierarchical model. This could, in part, be the case of the non-virtuous who need some form of internal correction and guidance from reason, but the virtuous, who listen even better to reason, are hardly in need of a top-down control system or of softer persuasive strategies in order to deliberate, act and think well. Their reasons and desires hit the right measure in equally balanced ways, and through practical wisdom and ethical virtues their reasons and desires collaborate jointly in such an intrinsically coordinated way that they take on each other's characteristics and respectively speak with the same voice and perceive what is the best thing to do.

The paper argues that the third view approach to the soul, which locates the reasoning partners next to each other in a parallel structure of mutual dependence, provides a fitting representation of the inner workings of rationality in the virtuous and those who have and lack self-control. Becoming virtuous and wise in practice constitutes two sides of the same state. Each side may be cultivated in distinct ways, ethical virtues mostly through habituation and practical

wisdom principally through teaching, but the cultivation of each side does not only affect and define the other side. In so far as they share an intersecting line, like in the image of convex and concave in the same curved surface, there is something that binds and even yokes them together, as Aristotle says. It is by way of listening that the desiderative part gets access to right reason, formulated by *phronēsis*, but for *phronēsis* to work well it is itself dependent on the ability to listen. Not only in the metaphorical sense that to possess *phronēsis* requires that one's desires listen, but in the concrete sense that if *phronēsis* is principally acquired through teaching, then the complementary side of this educational relation is to listen and learn which may be why Aristotle in *De sensu* remarks that in order to develop *phronēsis*, "hearing takes the precedence" (Aristotle 1908, 437 a 5–6). The connecting line between reason and desire, which fosters their integration, is established through the capacity to listen.

We remember that Aristotle states that the virtuous, who must also have *phronēsis* if they really are virtuous, listen still better. Yet, for them it does not seem adequate to say that they listen to reason like to a father who commands, warns and exhorts. In exceptional cases, there might still be some minimal amount of this in their souls, but in so far as reason has become integrated with their *ēthos*, i.e. who they are, and is no longer a power coming from outside or calling from a distance, the relationship to reason must be of a different and more intrinsic and integral kind. Could this be the motive behind Aristotle's mention of friends as contributors to having reason? Considering the immense significance which friendship has for promoting and consolidating the good life in *Nicomachean Ethics*, it would indeed be odd if the friends, highlighted by Aristotle next to the father, had nothing to do with his understanding of the ethical and political significance of friendship which he already hints at in Chap. 7 of the first book, where he asserts that *eudaimonia* is not possible without the company of family, friends and fellow citizens, "since a human being is by nature political" ((Aristotle 2014, p. 9 (EN I, 7, 1097 a 5–11)).

Although the ancient Greek word for friendship, *philia*, covers all relationships of love and care, including family relations which Aristotle also addresses in book VIII and IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*, the friends appearing next to the father can hardly refer to the same form of relationship as fatherhood. If they did, why would he bother to allude to both the father and the friends? *Philia* has different meanings for different people, but for the virtuous, with whom we are concerned in this context, friendship is the principal way of recognising themselves in the company of their equals by sharing their noble and well-ordered lives with each other. Good friends see each other for the sake of who they are, Aristotle affirms, and they rejoice in seeing virtues

becoming manifest in each other's actions ((Aristotle 2014, p. 169 (EN IX, 9, 1169 b 30–1170 a 12)). They may become so close and similar in their virtuous ways of thinking and acting that the friend becomes like “another self” (*allos autos*) (EN IX, 4, 1166 a 31–32).

With this famous expression, which has been interpreted in a variety of ways, Aristotle seems to have in mind those virtuous friends, whose souls are coherently well-composed. Regardless of whether Aristotle also includes other types of friends or not, the good friendship between virtuous people remains for him the paradigm of a stable relationship in which the friends do not encounter somebody or something extraneous which runs counter to their own ethos. One might see this conception of friendship as leading to an extreme case in which the partners merely mirror each other's virtues without contributing anything or having any options of advancing together. In certain passages, Aristotle may come close to viewing friendship like this, and in *Magna Moralia*, the friend is, in effect, compared to a mirror in which one can come to know oneself (Aristotle 1963, 680–681 (MM 1213 13–23)).

Yet, even if the good friends were only a mirror to each other, it would still confirm the point to be made here with reference to Aristotle's brief mention of the friends at the end of Chap. 13 of the first book. If these friends are virtuous, then they engage with each other by “sharing in talk and thought” (Aristotle 2014, p. 170 (EN IX, 9, 1170 b 11)), and thus obviously also by listening to each other; not as persons, who diverge or might oppose each other. Rather they listen to each other and understand each other better than other people and other friends, who may meet for other reasons than for the sake of seeing each other and thinking together. Good friendship could very well reproduce, not merely metaphorically, but in life, a measured and non-hierarchical constellation, similar to the one Aristotle may have in mind in the first book, between two or more virtuous people, whose desires and thoughts align with what is best by talking and listening still better to each other. In the soul of the virtuous, desire is no longer non-rational, as it is already attuned to what is reasonably best in life, and reason includes being sensibly receptive to others' “perceptions”, particularly good friends' reasonable insights.

Still, even good friends do probably not reach the point where they speak with the same voice. There are several passages in *Nicomachean Ethics* which contradict that Aristotle views good friendship as a relationship between people merely mirroring or reproducing each other's good or bad sides. There is some truth to this common sense view which Aristotle presents in the final section of his reflections on friendship, but in which he also adds that good people “seem to become better by being active and correcting each other” ((Aristotle 2014, p. 174 (EN IX, 12, 1172 a 6–12)). Already

in the first long paragraph of his two books on friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he draws attention to “those in their prime with a view to doing noble actions – for “when two go together” they are better able both to understand and to act” ((Aristotle 2014, p. 136 (EN VIII, 1, 1155 a 14–16)). Like in the first book, Aristotle employs the comparative to get to grips with how two or more partners go harmoniously together and reflect each other's virtuosity: “listen better”, “becoming better” and “being better able both to understand and to act” express different ethical advancements which take place inside the soul via friendship as potential promotor. Good friendship not only brings certain people closer together, by also holding cities together (Aristotle 2014, p. 136 (EN VIII, 1, 1155 a 14–16)), it even helps to make reasonable people more reasonable and yoke virtue and practical wisdom together so that sensuous perception and thoughtful understanding become two complementary expressions of rationality working well.

4 Conclusion

In opposition to two component readings of *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which Aristotle favours his own sketchy division of the soul in order to distinguish between ethical and intellectual virtues, the paper has argued that an alternative understanding of the soul, which Aristotle himself proposes and elaborates on in *De anima*, offers a better representation of his explanation of how virtue and practical wisdom become integrated: Like convex and concave in a curved surface include each other mutually and do not come into existence independently of each other, virtue and practical wisdom constitute two sides of the same state of equally balanced degrees of right reason and desire. The two presuppose each other in a reciprocal structure, within which it is only by joining forces and getting yoked together that they can deliver on the parameters required to live a good life.

In the final sections, the paper returns to the passage, in which Aristotle mentions the father and the friends as examples of reasonable people who we would listen to. The conclusion is reached that the more hierarchical model with the father as authority corresponds to reason as ruler over the unruly desires in those who have or lack self-control, whereas the friends represent, in so far as they are good friends, a constellation of equally virtuous partners who listen still better to each other's reasons as if they were another self to each other. In this sense, friendship can be interpreted as a potential contributor to living a good virtuous life in consonance with reason and practical wisdom which may be extended and enhanced when friends go together.

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