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Attending to the ‘Eye of Experience’: The Epistemic Demands of Identifying Good Actions in Aristotle

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In my article, I attempt to learn what Aristotle thinks about the epistemic demands of identifying good actions. He seems to claim in *Nicomachean Ethics* that we can identify them without knowledge why they are good, but his certain other claims seem to imply that his words should not be taken at face value. As John McDowell has pointed out, Aristotle also regards the goodness of an action as dependent upon its context. In this case, in order to identify an action as good, we would need to know, McDowell seems to think, what situation-specific features make it good. I argue, however, that even if good actions were context-dependent, this would not be the only way to identify them in Aristotle. To show this, I begin from contemporary philosophy. Hilary Putnam’s internal realism purports to explain how one can identify instances of a natural kind without knowing definition for the kind. David Charles has shown that Aristotle may subscribe to a similar view, although without assuming that there is even a definition for the kind. I argue that this aspect of Aristotle’s view makes it applicable to identifying good actions. One can identify good actions as those actions that are needed for a virtuous life. He does not need to know, *pace* McDowell, why certain actions are good. He only needs a conception of a virtuous life that he can, thinks Aristotle, develop by paying attention to those that have ‘the eye of experience.’

In my article,² I study Aristotle’s claims about the epistemic demands of identifying good actions. He claims in *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*)³ that we can identify them

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2 This paper derives from the Chapters 2 and 3: H. Hämäläinen, *Aristotle’s Steps to Virtue*, Doctoral thesis, The University of Edinburgh, 2015. I would like to thank Dory Scaltsas and Jaroslaw Olesiak for their helpful comments.

3 I shall be using two English translations of *Nicomachean Ethics*—abbreviated as *EN*—throughout the footnotes: 1) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, [in:] *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Revised Oxford Translation, Vol. II, trans. D. Ross, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1995—this translation shall be further abbreviated as (R); 2) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. C. Bartlett, S. D. Collins, Chicago, University of

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without understanding why they are good, but his certain other claims may seem to imply an opposite, less-intuitive view. As John McDowell has pointed out, Aristotle thinks that the goodness of an action depends upon the particular demands of the circumstances accompanying the action. This, according to McDowell, implies that identifying good actions requires understanding why the action would be good in these particular circumstances—i.e. the virtue of *phronesis* ('the eye of experience' in *EN* 6.13). Nevertheless, I attempt to show that even if good actions were context-dependent, Aristotle could explain how to identify them also without *phronesis*. However, since this is not explicit in *EN*, I begin from contemporary philosophy and Hilary Putnam's 'internal realism.' David Charles has compared it with Aristotle's theory of definition in *Posterior Analytics* (*APo.*) and concluded that also this theory explains how to identify natural kinds (e.g. gold) without understanding their defining principles (e.g. chemical structure), or, *pace* Putnam, without even *assuming* that the natural kinds have such principles. I argue that although Charles cannot extend his interpretation to actions—as they have *no* defining principles and, thus, his interpretation does not explain how they can form kinds such as 'good'—we can modify Charles' interpretation to succeed in referring to actions. I attempt to do this by integrating Charles' interpretation with Aristotle's discussion about the epistemic ability of *synesis* in *EN* 6. I suggest that this ability might serve as 'the eye of experience' for those that have not developed *phronesis* and enable them to identify actions as good.

I

Can we identify actions as good without understanding why they are good? At first sight, Aristotle seems to answer 'yes.' In *EN* 1.4, he says that in the study of ethics, "the beginning [*arche*] is the fact [*to hoti*], and if it is sufficiently clear to a man, he will not need the reason why [*to dioti*] in addition to it."⁴ The philosopher also states in *EN* 2.1 that "we study ethics not so that we may understand what virtue is, but so that we may become good."⁵ In the same book, he emphasises, moreover, that moral virtue, which presupposes a capacity to identify good actions, "is the result of habit," not of teaching

Chicago Press 2009—this translation shall be further abbreviated as (B&C). If there is no further abbreviation (R) or (B&C), the translation is my own from: Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* (*EN*), ed. I. Bywater, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press 2006. Whether I quote from (R) or (B&C), or modify them, is mostly determined by terminological consistency, i.e. so that the key terms, such as *to hoti* (the fact) and *to dioti* (the reason why), and the distinction between *architekton* (supervisor) and *cheirotechnes* (craftsman) remain clear across translations.

4 Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 1.4 1095b4–8.

5 *Ibidem*, op. cit., 2.2 1103b28–9 (R).

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that is reserved for intellectual virtues, such *phronesis* and *sophia*.⁶ Aristotle continues to downplay the importance of intellectual development for becoming a good person by claiming that acquiring moral virtue by habituation is analogous to acquiring a skill and consists of the repetition of certain kinds of actions:

By building houses, people become house-builders, by playing the cithara, they become cithara-players; so, too, then, by doing just things we become just, by doing temperate things, we become temperate; and by doing courageous things courageous.⁷

In *Metaphysics* (*Met*) 1.1, we learn further that a craftsman—whose epistemic state is a result of habituation, as it is the case with a morally virtuous person—does not need to understand *why* he should perform certain tasks, for such understanding would not improve his performance in his craft but perhaps only enable him to teach his skills to other people:

[The] supervisors (*architektonas*) in each craft are more honourable and know in a truer sense and are wiser than craftsmen (*cheirotechneis*), because they know *to dioti* ...; thus we view them as being wiser not in virtue of being able to act, but of having the theory for themselves and grasping (*gnorizein*) the causes. And in general it is a sign of the man who knows and of the man who does not that the former can teach (*didaskein*), and therefore we think skill more truly knowledge (*episteme*) than experience (*empeireia*); for a supervisor can teach, and men of mere experience cannot.⁸

Although above passages seem to imply that one can identify good actions without understanding why they are good, John McDowell offers an interpretation of Aristotle which goes in the opposite direction. Versions of this interpretation has been endorsed by Iakovos Vasliou, and Tom Angier. The thrust of McDowell's interpretation

6 Ibidem, op. cit., 2.1 1103a14–16 (B&C): “Both the coming-into-being and increase of intellectual virtue (*dianoetike arete*) results mostly from teaching—hence it requires experience and time—whereas moral virtue is the result of habit (*ethos*), and so it is that moral virtue (*ethike arete*) got its name by slight alteration of the term habit.”

7 Ibidem, op. cit., 2.1 1103a33–b2 (R).

8 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, [in:] *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Revised Oxford Translation, Vol. II, trans. D. Ross, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1995, 1.1 981a31–981b9. ‘Master craftsman’ replaced with ‘supervisor,’ and ‘manual worker’ with ‘craftsman,’ in line with H. Liddell, R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1940 that recommends translating *architekton* e.g. as ‘director of works’ and *cheirotechnes* as ‘handicraftsman.’

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lies in the argument that given *how* Aristotle describes good actions in *EN*, it would be cognitively impossible for one to identify them without first understanding what makes them good.

For example, in *EN* 1.3, Aristotle states that claims about good actions “admit much variety and fluctuation” and can be true “only for the most part.”⁹ These words of Aristotle, McDowell writes, imply that the process of deciding what kind of acting would be virtuous is “not susceptible of capture in any universal formula.”¹⁰ Instead, what makes an action good, Aristotle suggests in *EN* 2.6, is its meeting the various demands of a particular situation neither excessively, nor defectively—hitting “the mean relative to us.”¹¹ Since the mean is relative to us, appealing to it (e.g. eat only as much as you need) does not help us to identify good actions *without* the knowledge of the demands of the relevant situation (e.g. how much one needs to eat) that are particular. What would be too little food for Milo the professional wrestler, Aristotle elucidates, might be too much for a wrestling beginner.¹² In order to identify the correct amount of food, we need to grasp e.g. whether we are to prepare a meal for a professional wrestler or for a beginner, and be aware of people’s dietary requirements at the different stages of the wrestling training; in brief, we need to understand what the situation demands from us.

According to McDowell, Aristotle’s concept for understanding the moral demands of situations is *phronesis*.¹³ Aristotle sees *phronesis* in ethics as the combination of the knowledge of ‘the fact’ (*to hoti*, e.g. that I should eat such and such amount) and grasping ‘the reason why’ (*to dioti*, because I did not exercise today etc.): “*phronesis* is bound up with action,” he writes in *EN* 6.7, “and as a result one ought to have knowledge of *both* [‘the reason why’ and ‘the fact’], but more so of the latter.”¹⁴ In line with this, McDowell concludes that identifying good actions requires *phronesis*.¹⁵

9 See: Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 1.3 1094b14–22.

10 J. McDowell, *Virtue and Reason*, ‘The Monist’ 1979, Vol. 62, No. 3, p. 333.

11 See: Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 2.6 1106a25–35.

12 *Ibidem*, a36–b6.

13 J. McDowell, *Incontinence and Practical Wisdom in Aristotle*, [in:] *idem*, *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 2006, p. 66, *cit.* D. Wiggins, *Weakness of Will, Commensurability and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire*, [in:], *idem*, *Needs, Values, Truths, Oxford*, Blackwell 1987, p. 231, which presents a similar interpretation. However, only McDowell connects *phronesis* with *to dioti*.

14 Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 6.7 1140b20–2 (B&C).

15 J. McDowell, *Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology*, [in:] *idem*, *Mind, Value and Reality*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1998, p. 32. For some reason, McDowell does not quote *EN* 6.7 1140b20–2, although especially this passage would seem to support his conclusion that “*having* the right goal [i.e. the universal], being, as it is, inseparable from the ability to know what it is to be done occasion by occasion [i.e. the particular], is what practical wisdom [*phronesis*] is.”

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Therefore, Aristotle's answer to the question whether one can identify good actions without understanding why they are good would thus be 'no.'

However, probably in order to accommodate those claims of Aristotle (especially in *EN* 1.4 quoted above) that seem to state the opposite, McDowell adds that it is possible for the ability to identify good actions to be limited to "a primitive form" of *phronesis*.¹⁶ Such a primitive form of *phronesis* is something that everybody needs, no matter whether they are a student of ethics or an average person in the street. As can be read in *EN* 1.4, a student of ethics would also need to learn to understand the reason why something is identified as a good action, and this 'reason why' would not refer to the primitive *phronesis*, but, as McDowell writes, to a learned "reflectiveness and explicitness" which is not needed for merely identifying good actions, but for developing "a coherent conception of doing well."¹⁷ Only acquiring such a conception enable one to also teach ethics to others.

However, since McDowell's distinction between the two degrees of *phronesis* is speculative, Vasilou has attempted to improve this aspect of the interpretation. Vasilou argues that, in spite of McDowell's assumptions Aristotle does *not* say in *EN* 1.4 that one who can identify good actions *has to acquire* the reason why, and Vasilou thinks that Aristotle does not say so "precisely since one who possesses [the fact] sufficiently can correctly identify particular actions as being just, courageous, etc." and therefore "must already have a grasp of [the reason why]."¹⁸ Thus, Aristotle's claim in *EN* 1.4 that the student of ethics does not need to acquire the reason why does not even have to undermine McDowell's interpretation. After Vasilou, Angier has taken up this line of interpretation, concluding that Aristotle's analogues between moral- and craft-learning in *EN* 2.1—with the description of the cognitive needs of the latter in *Met.* 1.1, which implies that neither *presupposes* the reason why—must therefore be incogent.¹⁹

The above discussion clarifies why Aristotle's likely answer to the question whether we can identify good actions without understanding why they are good is less explicit than it may seem. At face value, Aristotle would seem to answer 'yes,' but if McDowell's interpretation is right, Aristotle would need to answer 'no,' because identifying good actions would be such a cognitively demanding task due the context-

16 J. McDowell, *Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle's Ethics*, op. cit., p. 52.

17 Ibidem, p. 56.

18 I. Vasilou, *The Role of Good Upbringing in Aristotle's Ethics*, 'Philosophy and Phenomenological Research' 1996, 56, no. 4, p. 789. Vasilou's translations for *to hoti* and *to dioti*, 'the that' and 'the because,' replaced with my translations, 'the fact' and 'the reason why.'

19 T. Angier, *Techne in Aristotle's Ethics: Crafting The Moral Life*, London, Continuum 2010, pp. 124–5.

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dependency of those actions that the task could not be accomplished without understanding why the actions are good. However, this interpretation would require that we skip Aristotle's analogues between moral- and craft-learning, as Angier had to do. Therefore, in order to avoid judging *EN* 2.1, and hence also *Met.* 1.1, as irrelevant to Aristotle's theory of moral learning, I would like to nevertheless think that Aristotle would answer 'yes.' However, also McDowell has strong textual support for the context-dependency of good actions in *EN* 1.3 and 2.6. Therefore, the interpretative challenge which I would like to undertake is to make McDowell's insight (which implies that identifying good actions require the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*) compatible with those passages in Aristotle in which becoming good appears as a non-intellectual process.

II

Aristotle's text has not helped us to settle the question whether or not identifying good actions presupposes understanding why they are good. However, at least in contemporary epistemology, Hilary Putnam has constructed a theory for explaining how people can identify things as belonging to certain kinds without understanding why they belong to those kinds. According to this theory, internal realism, we can identify a certain liquid as water without understanding why it is water (i.e. because its molecular structure is H₂O), by perceiving its similarity with the liquid that people call 'water'—for example, by noticing that it also is transparent, wet, odourless etc.²⁰ We can assume that what we identify as 'water' on the basis of our sense perception *is* a natural kind, because our experience of the world (that things can be defined) entitles us to assume that each perceptible object has certain features that determine its perceptible properties, even if we did not understand what those features are for some particular object.²¹

Martha Nussbaum remarked in 1980s that Aristotle's moral epistemology might work like Putnam's internal realism.²² Apart from this comment, however, she did

20 See H. Putnam, *The Meaning of Meaning*, [in:] idem, *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1975, esp. pp. 140–2. For the meaning of the concept of 'internal realism,' see e.g. Y. Ben-Menahem, *Hilary Putnam*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2005, p. 5.

21 See: D. Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2000, p. 11, that summarises Putnam's views as follows: "(1) Water (or gold etc. natural kind) has an (as yet unknown) fundamental feature, of a type grasped by scientists, which determines its other features, (2) Water has one and the same feature in all possible worlds in which it exists which fixes the identity of the kind and. (3) The (as yet unknown) fundamental scientific feature (specified in (1)) is the feature (mentioned in (2)) which fixes the identity of water in all possible worlds in which it exists."

22 M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1986, p. 312.

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not pursue this interpretation any further. However, Linda Zagzebski has recently attempted to show the applicability of internal realism to contemporary moral epistemology. She has suggested that apart from providing an account of identifying natural kinds, Putnam's theory could also explain how we can identify *good people*. Although Zagzebski does not discuss Aristotle, we might examine whether Aristotle could have agreed with her conclusions, which I quote below:

Good persons are persons like *that*, just as gold is stuff like *that*. . . . In fact, it is not necessary that anybody know what makes a good person good in order to successfully refer to good persons any more than it was necessary that anybody knew what makes water to successfully refer to water before the advent of molecular theory. . . . As with natural kinds like gold or water, people can succeed in referring to the good person as long as they, or some people in their community can pick out exemplars.²³

In the above passage, Zagzebski suggests that we can identify good people without understanding why they are good, just as we can identify natural kinds such as water without understanding the features that define it as water. Good people, Zagzebski argues, can be identified on the basis of “the emotion of admiration,” just as sense perception enables us to identify water. We tend to morally admire people who are good, just as we tend to identify liquid that has certain molecular structure as water.²⁴

However, Zagzebski's suggestion that the emotion of admiration can help us to identify good people puts her at odds with Aristotle, who thinks that many people whom we may consider good on the basis of our emotion of admiration are not good, for “moral weakness distorts [us], and causes [us], to be deceived.”²⁵ For example, in *EN* 6.5 he says: “we suppose that Pericles and the people of that sort have *phronesis*,”²⁶ although he also thinks that the kind of democracy that Pericles advanced led to tyranny²⁷ (echoing Socrates' criticism of Pericles in *Gorgias*).²⁸

23 L. Zagzebski, *Virtue Theory and Exemplars*, 'Philosophical News' 2012, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 158.

24 Ibidem, p. 159.

25 Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 6.12 1144a33–5.

26 Ibidem, op. cit., 6.5 1140b8–9. See: P. Aubenque, *La prudence chez Aristote*, Paris, Quadrige 1963, p. 46, and E. Berti 2008, *Phronesis et science politique*, [in:] idem, *Nuovi studi aristotelici*, Vol. III: filosofia pratica, Brescia, Morcelliana 2008, who assume that Aristotle refers to himself with 'we,' and considers Pericles a *phronimos*. Neither of them explains, however, why then Aristotle is critical of democracy (see footnote 24 below).

27 See: Aristotle's *Politics*, 5.5—Aristotle, *Politics (Pol.) and the Constitution of Athens (Ath. Pol.)*, trans. B. Jowett, ed. S. Everson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996—in which Aristotle criticises democracy on the basis of the reasoning that it leads to tyranny. See also: Aristotle's *Ath. Pol.*, 4.27–28 (written by Aristotle's students), in which Pericles is credited with contributing to this destructive development.

28 See: Plato, *Gorgias*, [in:] idem, *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. D. Seyl, ed. J. Cooper, Indianapolis, Hackett 1997, pp. 791–869, 515e–16a.

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Thus, Aristotle does not seem to be an internal realist about identifying virtuous people. But could he be an internal realist about identifying good actions? The answer may also seem to be ‘no.’ Aristotle does not seem to think that it is intuitive for us to assume that good actions have certain defining features that account for their goodness. In *EN* 1.3, he claims the contrary: due to their particularity, we assume good actions “exist only by convention and not by nature.”²⁹ Since we do *not* assume that good actions have certain fixed, perceivable features (i.e. such as that one could identify them *without* an expert knowledge analogous to the knowledge needed to establish that water is H₂O) that derive from their nature, we cannot intuitively see them as good. Therefore, our experience of the world may not enable us to identify actions as good unless we understood why a certain action would be good. This being the case, Aristotle’s moral epistemology could hardly represent Putnam-style internal realism.

III

In his 2000 book, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence*, David Charles has proposed that Aristotle could be a *different* type of internal realist than Putman, “according to [whose] account, one can understand the term water as a natural kind term without having [*pace* Putnam] any views as to whether water possesses a fundamental scientific feature.”³⁰ If we agreed with this conclusion of Charles’ interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of meaning in *Posterior Analytics*—which space does not permit me to review here—it may seem that we could explain how people can identify good actions without understanding why they are good. Provided that we could identify instances of natural kinds without *even* assuming that each natural kind has certain features that define it (such as a certain chemical structure), maybe we could also identify good actions that we, according to Aristotle, do not intuitively assume to possess any such features.

Aristotle may think, suggests Charles, that we can identify the instances of natural kinds by observing or consulting the people that *need* to correctly identify them in order to succeed in accomplishing their craft tasks. Recall the passage in *Met* 1.1, quoted on p. 3 above, according to which one task of a master craftsman is to teach the less experienced, and compare it with the following line from *EN* 6.11: “the *phronimoi* . . . have an eye of experience (*teis empeireias omma*), they see correctly.”³¹ Charles attempts to establish an analogue between aforementioned *Met* 1.1 and this metaphor:

²⁹ Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 1.3 1094b16 (R).

³⁰ D. Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence*, op. cit., p. 15.

³¹ Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 6.11 1143b13.

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First, without the master craftsman's understanding of kinds, we would be like those who are colour blind: unable to see what is there. As we need a properly functioning visual system to grasp colours, so we need the master craftsman's understanding to latch on to kinds. As the former does not undermine the realism of our colour judgements, so the latter need not undermine the status of our judgements about kinds.³²

Here, Charles uses the term 'master craftsman' *not* with reference to the *architecton*—who understands 'the reason why'—mentioned in *Met* 1.1, but with reference to an ordinary craftsman who is successful in what he does. The notion of a kind (*genos*) in Aristotle, Charles argues further, may derive from the perceptions of the craftsman, "for kinds, as we understand them, are ones of the type involved in our craft engagement with the world."³³ That is, we identify certain material as gold, for example, not because we perceive it as similar to the material we call 'gold' and assume that that the similarity is based on certain defining features, but because we perceive that a goldsmith can perform his work successfully on the condition that he considers only a certain kind of material to be gold.³⁴ The goldsmith, Charles writes,

grasps what can and cannot be done with the objects he confronts, and aims to learn where limitations in what can be done stem from him and where from the nature of the kind itself, such that no extension of his skill could change it. The nature of the kind is that what makes some things possible and others impossible for him.³⁵

If the goldsmith considered, for example, not only one particular kind of material but also something else as gold, he would fail at his work, as this other kind of material would melt at a different point and have a different malleability, etc. In brief, the goldsmith would not be a successful goldsmith any more.

As we now see how one might identify instances of natural kinds without understanding their defining features, or, *pace* Putnam, even assuming that they have such

32 D. Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence*, op. cit., p. 360.

33 Ibidem.

34 Here I replace 'water' with 'gold,' which is Putnam's another example (H. Putnam, *The Meaning of Meaning*, op. cit., p. 155–6), because I consider it more illuminating in this context. For identifying gold requires craftsmanship, unlike identifying water, which even unskilled people can reliably identify. Hence, it is not intuitive to call a person who can identify water across situations 'a craftsman.' However, since identifying *any* natural kind, even water, requires *some* experience, the difference in the degree of expertise does not affect Charles' argument, which only assumes that mere experience, instead of any more advanced epistemic state, suffices for identifying the instances of natural kinds.

35 D. Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence*, op. cit., p. 3.

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features, we can proceed to the issue of identifying good actions in Aristotle's ethics. Charles notices the possibility for the application of his conclusions:

There are several heroes (and heroines) elsewhere in Aristotle's thought whose role corresponds to that of the master craftsman. The [morally] virtuous know how to act and can explain why they act in that way, but need not know the fundamental principles concerning human well-being, which make their mode of action correct. Indeed, they may have no view as to whether there are any underlying principles of this type.³⁶

Charles seems to think we do not need to have advanced intellectual virtue in order to have moral virtue.³⁷ If we shared his belief in the applicability of his interpretation to the question of identifying good actions, we could think that just as a goldsmith can identify gold without having any understanding of its defining features, or without knowledge that it has those features, so we might need to have no understanding or assumptions about the features that define good actions in order to identify good actions. Like good craftsmen, even if we did not understand why some actions are good, we simply must be able to discern only certain kinds of actions as good so as not to fail to act well. If we considered an action that is not good as good—for example, we would consider “spending time in the drinking bouts”³⁸ to be a good action, just like a goldsmith who regards e.g. pyrite as gold—we would not be responsible moral agents.

IV

There is, however, a difference between natural kinds and good actions that makes it difficult to apply Charles' interpretation to the question of identifying the latter. Even if we could reliably identify (*pace* Putnam) the instances of natural kinds without having any assumptions about their defining features—through experience in working with them—Charles thinks that such features nevertheless *define* natural kinds

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 155.

³⁷ Although some (recently e.g. N. Bowditch 2008, *Aristotle on Habituation: The Key to Unlocking Nicomachean Ethics*, 'Ethical Perspectives' 2008, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 318) read EN 6.13 1144b32–3 as saying exactly the opposite, it explicitly states only that *phronesis* presupposes moral virtue: “it is neither possible to be masterfully good (*kyrios agathon*) without *phronesis*, nor it is possible to have *phronesis* without ethical virtue.” Bowditch would be right only if a *kyrios agathon* were a synonym for a morally virtuous person, not for a person who has both *phronesis* and moral virtue, which seems more likely.

³⁸ Aristotle, EN, op. cit., 3.5 1144b5–6 (R).

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in Aristotle (as in Putnam).³⁹ This makes it possible for our identifications to be true or false—they either correspond with the reality or not—so that we could be assessed to be mistaken if we regarded something that is not H₂O, but has an appearance of water, as water. Likewise, since it is not contradictory that bad actions could contribute to one's reputation as a responsible moral agent, good actions should have defining features that would allow us to judge cases like this.

Charles assumes that—just as natural kinds—also good actions are good on account of realising certain “fundamental principles concerning human well-being,”⁴⁰ although we neither need to understand those principles, nor think they exist, in order to identify good actions. However, in contrast to Charles' assumptions, there seem to be *no* fundamental principles that define good actions in Aristotle's ethical thought. Although in *EN* 1.4, the philosopher states that “acting well (*eupraxia*) is happiness (*eudaimonia*),”⁴¹ even this statement, which is probably the best candidate for a fundamental principle of human well-being in Aristotle, could not define good actions like H₂O defines ‘water.’ The philosopher admits in *EN* 1.10 that a person who has suffered “many great misfortunes” cannot be happy even if he acts well.⁴² However, if good actions have no defining features, then Aristotle would need to have another way of explaining what renders actions that tend to promote and sustain our reputation as responsible moral agents good.

Following the tenets of internal realism, until now we have been assuming that the features which define certain actions as good should be intrinsic to those actions, as it is the case with natural kinds; we have also observed that Aristotle does not acknowledge good actions to possess such features. However, what if the defining features are extrinsic to the actions? That is, that an action which we identify as good without understanding why—or even assuming that some of its features could account for its goodness—may not be good because *it has* such and such features, but because we identify it with *a certain epistemic capacity*. I argue next that that the capacity does *not* have to be *phronesis* that McDowell could now propose for this role.

In a relatively little-studied chapter of *EN*, 6.10, Aristotle seems to describe an epistemic ability that is not yet *phronesis* but is nevertheless connected with the passing of judgement (*krisis*), that is: the ability connected with distinguishing actions as good. The following section of 6.10 is the most relevant for this conclusion:

39 D. Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence*, op. cit., pp. 348–52.

40 *Ibidem*, p. 155.

41 Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 1.4 1095b19.

42 Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 1.10 1101a11–14.

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[*Synesis*] is concerned with the same things as *phronesis* (i.e. good action). *Synesis* and *phronesis* is not the same, however, for *phronesis* is characterized by the giving of commands (*epitaktikei estin*): its end is what one ought or ought not to do. But *synesis* is characterized by discernment (*krisis*) alone. For *synesis* and good *synesis*, as well as those who use *synesis* and those who do so well, is the same thing. And *synesis* is neither having *phronesis* nor gaining it (*oute to lambaneim phronesis*). Rather, just as learning is said to be using *synesis* (*synienai*), whenever it makes use of knowledge, so *synesis* is said to consist of making use of opinion to render a discernment about what someone else says (*allou legontos*), regarding the matters *phronesis* is concerned with.

Interpretations of the above passage can be found in Gauthier and Jolif's commentary to *EN*, Norman Dahl's book, *Practical Reason, Aristotle and The Weakness of Will*, and in an article by Robert Louden. These interpreters notice that *synesis* must differ from *phronesis*, but they have different readings on what *synesis* does. Dahl writes it "is like a purely intellectual or speculative grasp of moral ends, for it is primarily exercised when one passes judgment on the advice or moral pronouncements of someone else."⁴³ Louden would give *synesis* a wider range of application as a capacity to "issue a correct judgement of someone else's choice or action" apart from judging their moral advice or pronouncements.⁴⁴

Both Dahl and Louden concur in reading *synesis* to be a capacity to identify good moral views or actions. Unlike these interpreters, Gauthier and Jolif do not think, however, that *synesis* judges exclusively other people's moral views or actions.⁴⁵ For in the beginning of the quoted passage, Aristotle concludes that *synesis* "is concerned with the same things as *phronesis*" and in *EN* 6.8, he states the *phronesis* "is concerned with a man himself."⁴⁶ Thus, the task of *synesis* seems to include identifying what would be good in acting for oneself and not only for others. On account of this, Gauthier and Jolif translate *synesis* as 'la conscience.'

However, unfortunately for the interpreters, Aristotle does not elucidate in *EN* how *synesis* forms the judgement, but so he neither clarifies how *phronesis* makes it possible to understand why good actions are good. Irrespective of that, interpreters are generally satisfied with Aristotle's metaphor of the eye of experience as characterising the operation of *phronesis*: many, like McDowell, Vasiliou, Angier,

43 N. Dahl, *Practical Reason, Aristotle, and the Weakness of the Will*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1984, p. 46.

44 R. Louden, *What is Moral Authority? Eubolia, Synesis and Gnome vs. Phronesis*, 'Ancient Philosophy' 1997, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 112. Italics removed from the quotation.

45 Ibidem, p. 112, and N. Dahl *Practical Reason, Aristotle, and the Weakness of the Will*, op. cit., p. 46.

46 See Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 6.5 1140b21 for the former quotation, and *EN* 6.8 1141b30 (R) for the latter.

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and even Charles—as we have seen—regard it as one of Aristotle’s major insights into the nature of practical reason.

Aristotle seems to use the same metaphor with *synesis*. In the light of what he says about *synesis* operating through making use of opinions, by advising us to “pay attention to the unjustified *opinions* of the experienced and older,” apart from the opinions of *phronimoi* in *EN* 6.11,⁴⁷ Aristotle is likely to be referring to the people who possess *synesis*, who do not need to understand why good actions are good (which would enable them to also justify their opinions like the *phronimoi*). Thus, Aristotle seems to think that even if some widely admired persons, such as politicians like Pericles, can be unreliable moral exemplars, many, if not most, people’s moral *opinions* are nevertheless reliable. Although not *phronimoi*, also these people (of *synesis*) share, according to the philosopher, the eye of experience with which they *see correctly*.

The above interpretation of *EN* 6.10 would enable a coherent application of Charles’ interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of definition to the study of his ethics. This would be an advantage to the McDowellian interpretation, according to which *phronesis* is necessary for identifying good actions, despite the fact that Aristotle seems to imply otherwise in *EN* 1.4, 2.1. and *Met.* 1.1. Although the goodness of an action can be bound to a situation in such a way that only the understanding of the demands of the situation would allow one to tell why that action is good, having such moral understanding, or *phronesis*, may be no more essential for identifying those actions than understanding the molecular structure of gold—or even that there is such a structure—is for the goldsmith’s craft. According to Charles, one can identify actions that enable one to work with gold through experience in being a goldsmith, and this is so because the molecular structure of gold allows the gold to be dealt with only in a certain way. In contrast, good actions evade definition in Aristotle, although Charles would not like to admit this. However, we can replace Charles’ textually ungrounded assumption that in Aristotle certain “fundamental principles concerning human-well-being” define good actions, like certain molecular structure defines gold, with what I have interpreted to be Aristotle’s view on the basis of *EN* 6.10. According to my interpretation, good actions are good because through the ability of *synesis*—an eye of experience that does not presuppose an intellectual virtue—one judges certain actions as good. With this revision, we could see that Aristotle’s view that we can identify good actions without understanding why they are good is compatible with another view of his: that those actions are responses to the demands of particular situations and cannot be identified by appealing to principles.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *EN*, op. cit., 6.11 1143b12.

Abstrakt

W niniejszym artykule analizuję koncepcję Arystotelesa dotyczącą wymagań epistemicznych koniecznych do identyfikacji czynów moralnie dobrych. W *Etyce Nikomachejskiej*, Arystoteles zdaje się twierdzić, że jesteśmy w stanie rozpoznawać takie czyny, nie mając wiedzy o tym, dlaczego są one dobre. Inne twierdzenia zawarte w tych dziele, nie pozwalają jednak na bezkrytyczne przyjęcie tej tezy. Zdaniem Johna McDowella, Arystoteles uważał, iż dobro etyczne czynu jest zależne od kontekstu. Gdyby tak było, by rozpoznać dany czyn jako dobry, musielibyśmy wiedzieć jakie cechy danej sytuacji czynią go dobrym. Bronię tezy, że nawet jeśli dobro czynu byłoby zależne od kontekstu, Arystoteles nie uważałby znajomości tego kontekstu za jedyny sposób rozpoznania czynu jako dobry. By tego dowieść, sięgam do dorobku współczesnej filozofii. Realizm wewnętrzny Hilarego Putnama pozwala wyjaśnić w jaki sposób podmiot rozpoznaje egzemplarze należące do danego rodzaju naturalnego, bez znajomości definicji tego rodzaju naturalnego. David Charles pokazuje, że Arystoteles podziela podobny pogląd, choć nie uważa, że podmiot musi zakładać, iż istnieje definicja danego rodzaju. Twierdę, że ten aspekt teorii Arystotelesa może być zastosowany także do identyfikacji czynów moralnie dobrych. Jednostka może rozpoznawać dobre czyny jako czyny konieczne do prowadzenia cnotliwego życia. Nie musi wiedzieć dlaczego określone czyny są dobre. Wystarczy, że ma wizję dobrego życia, którą – jak twierdzi Arystoteles – może rozwinąć poprzez naśladowanie tych, którzy mają „oko doświadczenia”.