Moral perfection and the tragic sense of life

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MORAL PERFECTION AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

by

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The ideal of moral perfection is rejected by most modern moral philosophers. This is because of a confused and superficial understanding of what perfection means, created largely as a result of influences from modern liberalism, which discounts the importance of character in moral conduct. However, rejecting the ideal of moral perfection diminishes and devalues what it means to be a human being.

To clarify our moral thinking, we should turn to a re-evaluation of Aristotle's ethics, a sound and coherent morality that is grounded on the belief that the ideal of moral perfection is an attainable good in human life.

Perfection etymologically means "completion." Aristotle's ethics understands moral perfection as human completion, or happiness and human flourishing. Moral perfection is attained through the achievement of moral virtuosity, the habituation of virtuous actions that aims toward a mean in moral conduct, expressing the human best for any individual. Aristotle's emphasis on character gives a valuable depth and meaning to moral goodness, while striving toward an ideal of perfection is what gives quality and worth to human activity and character, even more so perhaps than actually reaching the goal.

Tragedy gives us clear examples of moral imperfection that can be explained in terms of Aristotle’s ethics, supplemented by moral concepts in his treatise on tragedy, the Poetics. Examination of scenes from two Greek tragedies, the Antigone and the Agamemnon, illustrates Aristotle’s ethical principles, revealing just how difficult moral choice is and the value of an ideal of moral perfection to human life and worth. Tragedy then becomes a useful tool for ethical reflection and insight; it forces us to re-examine what it means to be a human being and to focus on what is truly important in living well. Aristotle’s ethics and Greek tragedy are, therefore, complementary, both concerned with moral depth. A careful study of both may serve to aid in the development of moral depth in ourselves.
Acknowledgments

The writing of this thesis has been like trying to climb Mt. Everest, a long, arduous journey with many stops and starts that began in Autumn 1989. The summit always seemed far away and impossible to reach. Now, I have finally reached my goal, and I am eager to leave this mountain peak behind and make a new beginning on other journeys that lie ahead. Nevertheless, I am also sad at leaving something which has been with me for so long. I have many good memories of my time at the University of Montana, especially of the kindness my professors have shown me. I am very grateful for their care and consideration. Their encouragement has meant more to me than they can ever know. As I look back on my classes and this project, I value these memories most.

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Moral Perfection and the Tragic Sense of Life

Introduction

In Homer's *Iliad* Achilleus recounts a myth to king Priam of Troy, who has endured more sorrow and misfortune than any mortal alive and has now come to beg for the body of his son Hector from Achilleus, the man who has slain all of Priam's sons. The myth describes how good and evil come to the human being as a chance gift from the gods. There are two urns, Achilleus says, that sit on the threshold of Zeus, one filled with good fortune, the other with evil. The one to whom Zeus gives a mixture from the two urns suffers both evil and good. But, to the one who receives from the second urn alone, evil only comes, driving him over the earth, reviled and without honor, a failure in the eyes of men and the gods. Socrates refers to this myth in Plato's *Republic*, rejecting its theme. Only good comes from the gods, he says, evil comes from some other cause. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that chance can mar our complete happiness by bringing a lack of such things as beauty or wealth (*NE I.8 1099a31-1099b9*). Nevertheless, Aristotle insists that everyone whose capacity for goodness has not been maimed can acquire happiness. Happiness, the ultimate human good, he says, although a truly divine and blessed thing, is best attained by human effort. Aristotle firmly maintains that since nature is ordered in the best way possible it would be too "discordant" (*πλημελές*) for human happiness, the best and greatest of all things, to be turned over to chance; it would be entirely contrary and out of tune with how nature is best ordered (*NE I.8 1099b19-24*).

Thus, we have two views of good and evil, one that resigns our human good to
an unpredictable chance, beyond human control, and another that gives hope that
happiness is possible through human effort. This thesis examines how good and
evil comes to the human being, the ultimate value of striving to be good and the best
we can be as human beings. I shall argue that we must take the ideal of moral
perfection seriously, as did Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. By aspiring
toward such an ideal, it is indeed possible to attain happiness, enriching our lives
with the meaning and purpose of what it truly is to be a human being.

In Chapter 1 we find that perfection is commonly rejected as a standard for
human goodness by modern moral philosophers. In a survey of a selection of views
from a few of these philosophers, it becomes clear that their conception of the ideal
of moral perfection is distorted and superficial. Moral perfection is described in
terms of an unattractive, unhealthy moral sainthood, and as implying heroic action
lying outside the realm of everyday morality. Human imperfection is hailed as
admirable and even wonderful, while morality itself in its complexity and diversity
is deemed too difficult to understand and define adequately; hence, it is dismissed as
unfit to be used by the human being as a guide to a good life. Moral philosophy
appears to have turned itself upside down; the ordinary, flawed and base life has
become the ideal and the morally superior bad. This erroneous rejection of moral
perfection has been influenced by Christianity and its saintly images of moral
goodness. It also appears to have been influenced by liberalism, the modern
political theory that has brought ideals of justice and individual rights to the
forefront in moral theory. This has resulted in a loss of a consideration of the
importance of character and character development in the definition of a good
human life and being a good human being. We thus lose much of what it means to
be a human being in this modern view of human morality; for the person who acts
out of a depth and quality of character gains moral depth and greater self-worth, his
life’s choices have a greater impact and value.

Aristotle’s concept of moral perfection arises out of a much more substantial and complete understanding of perfection and a consideration of the whole human being. Perfection is more properly understood as human completion and flourishing in Aristotle’s moral theory. Chapter 2 examines Aristotle’s version of perfection in his *Nicomachean Ethics*—in his definition of happiness, in its relationship to the development of parts of the human soul, and in its connection to quality in human character and action through the development of virtuosity in being a human being. We find that Aristotle’s moral vision is based on certain metaphysical assumptions that give it a special coherency and stability which is lacking in modern moral theory.

Moral virtuosity is achieved in Aristotle’s ethical theory through habituation of virtuous actions and attitudes, and in the practice of the doctrine of the mean, an ideal of moral goodness that is individualized within an individual’s own capacity for human completeness, yet defined by absolute limits of vice that do not accept mediocrity or allow corruption of the moral good. This allows for a certain degree of variability in moral perfection that defends Aristotle’s theory from many of the objections voiced by modern moral thinkers against perfection. Since Aristotle’s ethics is an agent-emphasis theory, he describes moral conduct as arising from character. This gives much of the depth and meaning to moral goodness that is valuable in his ethics, but it also creates a certain ambiguity, since character and one’s "humanness" are difficult to define. Nevertheless, many scholars do support the validity of Aristotle’s theories; they believe his ethics does have relevance in today’s world since his ethical thought is centered around human universals and have a flexibility that allows application to the particulars of changing circumstances of time, culture, and place.
To understand fully Aristotle's views on moral perfection, it is necessary to review his theory of moral error, or moral imperfection. Aristotle discusses a broad range of categories of moral error, showing that human error is most often the result of varying degrees of ignorance about what constitutes the moral good, the target toward which moral virtuosity, or perfection aims. The extent to which Aristotle discusses moral error in his ethics indicates that error is a prominent factor to be considered in living successfully as a human being. Aristotle admits that the acquisition of moral virtuosity is not easy, but that this makes moral perfection that much more valuable a goal toward which the human being aspires. According to Aristotle, ultimate human perfection is achieved in the contemplative life, a life which touches upon the divine in the human being. This creates confusion in Aristotle’s account of moral perfection; yet, the controversy over what exactly Aristotle intends by the contemplative life does not detract from his theory as a whole. In fact, Aristotle gives even greater value to striving for our human completeness with his connection of human perfection to the divine. Aristotle implies that it is the heroic striving for the ideal that is most important, more important than actually achieving our goal. The struggle toward moral perfection is ultimately what gives greater quality to human character and activity; by reaching for perfection (completeness in human flourishing) and the divine in the human being, a deeper meaning, purpose, and value is gained for human life as a whole.

Chapter 3 links Aristotle’s ethics and Greek tragedy through Aristotle’s theory of tragedy in his Poetics. Aristotle’s views on moral imperfection lead naturally into a discussion of tragedy and the tragic sense of life where moral imperfection is dramatized as the cause of human downfall and suffering. The modern understanding of tragedy as nihilistic appears to contradict Aristotle in its
implication that human virtuosity and goodness are not sufficient for human happiness, that the world order may actually be opposed to happiness and the moral aspirations of humankind. However, we find that these modern views on the tragic are not quite like the ancient Greeks’, whose tragic drama is grounded in the belief that there is order and purpose and meaning in the world, despite human error and suffering. We also find evidence in Aristotle’s treatise on tragedy, the Poetics, of numerous echoings of concepts in Aristotle’s ethics. Aristotle’s ethics are therefore compatible with Greek tragedy, while his views on the requirements for constructing the proper tragic plot complement and amplify his ethical principles with many moral elements of its own. Although Plato rejected tragedy because of its tendency to promote immorality, Aristotle does not. Aristotle sees tragedy as a true imitation of human life, which provides some kind of moral benefit to its spectators.

However, there is intense debate and controversy over Aristotle’s theories of tragedy because he does not fully explain his various concepts, making it difficult to interpret exactly what he means.

Nevertheless, tragedy vividly illustrates how difficult moral choice is and the value of moral perfection in human life. As such tragedy can be used as a valuable tool for reflection on the human condition and ethical values encountered in life. Therefore, in Chapter 4, scenes from two Greek tragedies, Sophocles’ Antigone and Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, are discussed in detail to demonstrate more fully the significance of Aristotle’s theories and provide a better understanding of what morality is all about. Antigone highlights what it means to choose to do the deeply right in life. Using Aristotle’s ethics, we see how the principal characters, Antigone and Creon, are deficient in moral goodness, how their character vices contribute to the destruction of their lives. In the Parodos of the Agamemnon we witness in full detail the emotional turmoil of moral choice, the agonizing dilemma
of deciding what one ought to do when confronted with choosing between two seemingly valid rights, or between two evils. This scene of the elders recounting the story of Iphigeneia's sacrifice demonstrates a sense of the tragic as a distinct world view and emotional tone, as a tension between hope and despair. In the characters of Agamemnon and Clytaemestra we see further evidence of how moral imperfection leads to death and destruction.

I conclude my thesis in Chapter 5 with a more in depth discussion of the issues raised by the tragedies outlined in Chapter 4 as they relate to moral perfection and Aristotle's ethics. The one who does what is deeply right must choose to act from a moral goodness that has been developed completely, where goodness of character is united with appropriate action. However, modern moral philosophers usually describe morality in terms of rules and principles that require only certain actions of the human being, not a certain character, or way of being. This is an incomplete understanding of morality. These Greek dramas show us that a virtuous character is necessary for making moral decisions and living well as a human being. In conjunction with Aristotle's ethics, tragedy reveals more fully the value of moral depth in living a life which is morally true, true to the particulars of our life and true to ourselves as human beings. This thesis is therefore fundamentally about moral depth, a depth and truth in moral action that can only come from accepting a standard of moral perfection as a means of attaining a human flourishing and completeness that will give nobility and honor to human life and, ultimately, make life worth living for the human being.
Chapter 1
Perfectionism in Modern Moral Philosophy

John Rawls, a prominent contemporary moral and political philosopher, defines perfectionism as the maximization of human excellence in art, science, and cultural pursuits. Rawls accepts such a standard of excellence in cultural activities, but he strongly rejects the principle of perfectionism in his theory of justice on the grounds that, as a governing principle of society, it is unjust, since perfection requires that the rights and resources of a society be unequally directed toward the cultivation of a few highly talented people at the expense of the many. Maximization of the good in human excellence would, Rawls argues, claim a higher value than equal rights, jeopardizing our individual liberties. Furthermore, he explains, since criteria for standards of excellence vary greatly among different individuals, classes, and groups of people, the application of perfectionism as a political and social standard of value would be too imprecise, unsettled, and idiosyncratic.

Although John Rawls' thoughts on perfectionism are not representative of that of all modern moral philosophers, it is, nevertheless, rare to find whole-hearted support of perfection in modern moral thought. This seems strange when one considers that morality essentially involves conformity to standards of right and wrong and good and bad. One would think that there might be a need for a standard of the perfectly moral to refer to and affirm and that, without it, the significance of moral thought and behavior would be diminished or degraded. Yet there now is often a reluctance to embrace the goal of perfection in conduct or character as a good in moral philosophy, or even outright repudiation of the ideal of
human perfection; consequently, there are those who argue against the value of such a standard, as will be shown below. These arguments reveal a confusion which is due to the fact that many modern moral philosophers, such as John Rawls, are operating out of an act-emphasis, egalitarian, modern liberal tradition. Their rejection of moral perfection indicates that they are also just simply confused about what moral perfection means. In contrast, however, there is a clear and sound concept of moral perfection to be found in Aristotle's ethics.

Elizabeth Anscombe, in her influential essay "Modern Moral Philosophy," and Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book After Virtue, have criticized the confusion that exists generally throughout modern moral theory. Both of these scholars hold that modern moral thinking is in complete disarray, the incoherence of its discourse due to a misunderstanding and misuse of moral vocabulary. Moral terms, they say, have been distorted through time with the accretion and fragmented overlay of different philosophical traditions. There is, therefore, according to MacIntyre, little chance of resolving moral issues because we are so unaware of the moral disorder created by this confused conglomeration of moral philosophies and traditions which has become the foundation of our moral thought. These scholars furthermore suggest that in order to regain clarity in our moral thinking and a true understanding of morality we return to the origins of modern ethics and moral thought; that is, we should turn to a reflection upon and re-evaluation of Aristotle's ethics and the ancient Greek moral tradition. Their suggestion, thus, implies that Aristotle's moral philosophy is much more accurate and sound than modern moral theory. But, since Aristotle's ethics is founded upon a belief that moral perfection is attainable and a good in human life, such a return to Aristotle must mean a return as well to the ideal of moral perfection as a good.

In this thesis I shall argue that the rejection of the ideal of moral perfection by
modern moral philosophers arises out of a superficial understanding of morality; to discard this ideal as a standard for moral behavior devalues and diminishes what it means to be a human being. As Anscombe and MacIntyre suggested, I shall also argue my thesis by way of a return to Aristotle and the ancient Greeks. I shall explore the ideal of moral perfection through a consideration both of Aristotle's virtue ethics and ancient Greek tragedy, a study of which will defend Aristotle's ideal of moral perfection against charges that it is unattainable and undesirable for living well as a human being, and will demonstrate the significance of moral perfection through the dramatic depiction of human suffering.

First, I wish to survey briefly what I consider to be the distorted picture of moral perfection in a selection of views from a few modern moral thinkers. The most prominent and well-known of these is the essay "Moral Saints" by Susan Wolf. In her essay Wolf paints a very curious picture of what it is to be as morally good as possible--a "moral saint," by Wolf's definition. She defines a moral saint as one who commits his life totally to improving the welfare of others, or society as a whole, and thereby gladly sacrifices his own happiness for the happiness of others. Wolf gives as examples Mother Theresa and St. Francis of Assisi. Such a moral saint would be virtuous to a superlative degree in the effort to treat people as justly and as kindly as possible. The moral saint is thus so preoccupied with being and doing good that, according to Wolf, he has no time or opportunity to develop other non-moral virtues and pursuits which would round out and enrich his personality and life in a healthy way. Wolf notes these neglected pursuits include such things as gourmet cooking, an interest in fashion design, and the fine arts. The moral saint's sense of humor would also be affected so that he would not be able to appreciate a cynical or sarcastic wit, and thus be unable to laugh at a Marx brothers' movie or a George Bernard Shaw play.
By sacrificing all interests to such a single-minded devotion to morality, the moral saint, who is just too good and nice for his own well-being, would end up dull-witted, humorless, and bland, unable, Wolf says, truly to love the small mundane joys of life such as a fishing trip, one's own stereo, or a hot fudge sundae. Such a person would, in short, be a moral fanatic and, by Wolf's implication, a moral freak as well—a thoroughly unattractive person whom no one would want to be around. Finally, Wolf suggests that individual perfection, the point of view from which we evaluate "what kinds of lives are good and what kinds of persons it would be good to be," may actually lie outside of the moral point of view and moral perfection, and that neither point of view is one "we are ever obliged to take up and express in our actions." In this conclusion Wolf appears to discount moral goodness entirely, excluding it from any consideration as an important part of living a good life.

J.O. Urmson's essay "Saints and Heroes" classifies in some detail actions of moral worth, especially those of the saint and hero. Urmson is much more approving than Wolf of such persons; however, like Wolf, he seems to place the hero and saint--thus, the status of the morally perfect--well outside of the reach of the ordinary human being and everyday moral behavior. Urmson defines the saint and hero as one who does his duty in situations where most people fail. Through an exceptional self-control the saint resists desire and self-interest, while the hero resists natural fear and self-preservation in the performance of his moral actions. Urmson, however, creates a separate and exclusive category for those actions of the saint and hero which go above and beyond the call of duty. This category of acts has come to be called the "supererogatory" from a Latin compound meaning "beyond due payment." An example of the saint in Urmson's sense would be the unmarried daughter who stays home to attend to an invalid parent; the hero would
be the terrified doctor who stays in a plague ridden city to nurse its inhabitants.
Examples of the supererogatory are the doctor who "volunteers" to go the plague-ridden city and the soldier who throws himself on a live grenade to save his comrades.

Urmson argues that the supererogatory saint or hero may feel morally obliged to do what he does and deserves high moral praise and admiration, however, clearly a person would not be a moral failure if he did not sacrifice his life by throwing himself on a live grenade. It would be ridiculous to demand such acts, Urmson states, for not everyone should be expected to go off and nurse lepers, however high in moral worth such an action is. Furthermore, acts of heroism and saintliness such as these are more gracious actions than the minimally morally required and need to be inspired by a positive ideal rather than the simple avoidance of evil which underlies most dutiful actions. Urmson is hinting, perhaps, at an ideal of moral perfection here, yet, in the end he concludes that we need a moral code that is workable for men, not angels; as he says, "a line must be drawn between what we can expect and demand from others and what we can merely hope for and receive with gratitude when we get it."9

Owen Flanagan’s essay "Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection" questions the sovereignty of the moral-good—the belief that moral considerations override all other considerations as the supreme value.10 Flanagan, like Wolf, appears to discard the ideal of moral perfection as unattainable and undesirable. People may indeed appear to be admirably immoral, Flanagan asserts, and he gives examples of several cases where admirable traits of artistic passion, parental devotion, and patriotism are mixed with immoral actions in ways that make it difficult to make absolute moral judgments:11

1) Gauguin in anguish deserts his family to pursue his artistic ambitions in
the South Pacific.

2) A father who believes one should turn in criminals misleads the police to protect his son.

3) Churchill approves the fire bombing of Dresden in order to defeat the Nazis, contrary to humanitarian war conventions which protect civilian targets.

4) A reformist political leader who believes torture is wrong, nevertheless tortures the leader of a terrorist group in order to get information about the location of time-bombs set to go off throughout the capital city.

Flanagan admits that there can be disagreements in all these cases about the admirability of traits and the immorality of actions and he warns that our judgment must be highly conditional. Although the acts may be determined to be acceptable, they must be examined in the larger contextual picture of things—the causes and consequences of each particular case. To emphasize further the nature of such moral complexity, Flanagan gives the example of the expert spy whose skills of cunning and deception become much less admirable when taken out of his professional role and manifested in his personal family life. Yet Flanagan also concedes that, although the moral good could conceivably be preserved in such cases, it also risks being severely undermined as well.

In his discussion of admirable imperfection, which he defines with Susan Wolf's own words, "the person who may be perfectly wonderful without being perfectly moral," Flanagan likewise agrees with Wolf that when ideals of morality conflict with non-moral ideals, it is proper, even preferable, to disregard the morally ideal. Ideals of morality, Flanagan states, cannot provide a comprehensive guide to the conduct of life. He makes a distinction between the morally ideal and the morally required and associates this division with Urmson's idea of supererogation to preserve the notion of a supreme moral good. By this Flanagan means that we must place the morally ideal in a separate and optional category of moral goodness.
since achievement of the morally ideal does indeed have great moral worth and does need to be acknowledged as a potential path of action. But adherence to standards of the morally ideal—which Flanagan describes as the maximization of the moral good in every act a person performs—will, Flanagan proclaims, inevitably conflict with what is morally required. Flanagan therefore feels that it is unfair to view as morally deficient the person who cannot fulfill both standards unconditionally.

Flanagan argues that these distinctions are difficult to draw, but necessary; otherwise our conception of morality is unrealistically demanding and may prevent the development of other goods, other admirable non-moral traits and talents. After all, he warns, moral theory could then demand that we all must do what Mother Theresa does. Our constant efforts at "doing good" will then interfere with other interests and responsibilities in our lives, as, for example, the conflict that could arise over investing money in one's children's education rather than in some worthy charity which helps the poor and disadvantaged. Flanagan, like Wolf, obviously equates the morally ideal, or moral perfection, with moral sainthood, a moral status which he places in a superior category of moral goodness, but which he argues should be optional and not required of every human being.

By the end of his essay, Flanagan not only retreats from the morally ideal, but eventually he also rejects the morally required. He justifies this rejection by maintaining that there are so many conflicting points of view about what morality is, that it is impossible to determine what is morally required. Realism about individual perfection and multiple points of view demands an emphasis on personal particularity. The best that can be done, Flanagan suggests, is that we keep talking about morality from a wide variety of perspectives and that we acknowledge that no one view can capture the essence of morality. It is therefore a mistake, Flanagan concludes, to believe that "morality has a nature that can be revealed by moral
philosophy. This is a very odd statement for a moral philosopher to make. If morality is discarded, how do we know what is truly good and right? Would murder and theft therefore become in some sense acceptable and justifiable? Yet Flanagan does indeed deny that morality has a place in deciding how it is best for the human being to live a good life. He makes such a denial because morality as a concept and a philosophical thesis, he says, has failed to address adequately the issues of moral goodness and the good life: "it lacks content and does little action-guiding or dispute-resolving work." Flanagan looks upon the widespread disagreement and the incoherent disarray of our moral discourse and he simply gives up on morality. He concludes, paradoxically, that we have no other recourse but to find other ways of talking about the good for the human being than through an understanding of the moral domain.

In a dramatic contrast to the previous philosophers, Antony Duff’s essay "Must a Good Man be Invulnerable" portrays the morally perfect person as detached from the world and all human relationships. He describes the ideal of moral perfection as simply "the Good," an ideal which Duff does not fully explain except to say that the supreme value for the good man is in acting rightly regardless of his misfortunes in life. Furthermore, any judgment of what constitutes a man’s well-being must be based on a conception of what is most important in life which is independent of any individual’s own subjective values. Duff, therefore, asserts that the good man "must be committed to a transcendent and "inhuman" good which belongs within a religious or moral viewpoint radically at odds with many human conceptions of morality." He must furthermore relate to the Good in ways that do not involve him in an egoism which would negate the very values he professes. This good man is virtuous because he wills the Good, but his happiness is not secured by his own virtue, as this would be a commitment to an egotistical goodness, rather than the
Good itself. As the Good is detached from the world so is the good man who serves this Good. The morally perfect person, therefore, is detached from a dependence on others, as attachment and identification with family, friends, and job jeopardize the good man’s moral life, because he can be harmed and destroyed by what happens to those he loves and cares about. If the good man is to be invulnerable, Duff argues, he must "die to the world" and give up all self-seeking goals and material aspirations and relationships central to human lives and morality. Ultimately, although, Duff concedes, the good man can be harmed and morally destroyed, his well-being lies in achieving what is important to him and what is important to the Good, not in his own moral perfection, for whatever happens in the world, the Good itself cannot be harmed and that is all that really matters.

At first glance the word ‘perfect’ conjures up images of the absolutely pure, unblemished, that without defect or flaw. It also implies a uniqueness or oneness, particularity, and precise correctness. This image of perfection seems to gather the world up into a single shining point, smooth, sharp-edged, and brilliantly clear. It contains, as well, Christian implications of the divine perfection of God and the presence or absence of sin. Considering such connotations, it is little wonder that these four modern moral thinkers all seem to conceive of perfection as narrow, restrictive, or oppressive. As everyone knows, they seem to assume, no one can be absolutely perfect except God. Perfection, therefore, in light of this assumption, is unattainable for the human being, and all efforts to become perfect are thus in some sense useless and self-defeating.

It does not seem necessary, however, that the morally perfect person need be a saint or hero, admirably imperfect, or completely and inhumanly detached from the world and people whom one cares about. Moreover, these moral philosophers do not distinguish striving for perfection from actually attaining it. They do not realize
that it is also not necessary for an ideal to be worth striving for that it be attainable, or that all aspects of the ideal be desirable. Even without knowing the philosophical background in each of these essays, one can sense the author’s confusions and prejudices about the concept of perfection, or simply feel that his argument does not make sense. These are serious moral thinkers whose intent is to argue rationally about moral perfection; yet, in many instances, their arguments descend into the absurd and they do not even seem to be aware of it.

For Susan Wolf sainthood is clearly a pejorative term. In her essay she is prejudiced from the outset against the personality she envisions as appropriate for a saint—a dull, "goody-two-shoes" and a social freak. Wolf also defines moral perfection solely in terms of a manner of altruistic behavior that is entirely self-sacrificing, narrowing its scope and application considerably. She fails to see or even consider the saint as a whole, complete person. Hence Wolf fails to see moral perfection in any real depth so that her description and analysis can not be anything else but superficial. Moreover, she trivializes moral goodness in the same way by comparing its moral worth to interests such as cooking, fashion design, movies, stereos, and hot fudge sundaes. In the end, morality to Susan Wolf appears to be nothing more than a personality trait, a popular (or unpopular) lifestyle, rather than a serious way of life, while moral perfection is rejected entirely as a fanatical, unhealthy ideal. While Urmson considers moral perfection much more seriously, nevertheless his analysis is also fundamentally negative. Moral perfection is not to be expected or striven for by ordinary human beings; it belongs to an angelic code of behavior to be placed well outside ordinary everyday morality. Urmson, therefore, retreats from the morally ideal by relegating its application to saintliness and heroism, the exception rather than the rule. The saint and the hero are exceptional individuals, their saintly and heroic actions achieved only rarely as
remarkable, almost blessed events. The saint and the hero become not only extraordinary, but are included in a category of human being and human action that also becomes strangely unnatural in Urmson's account because the saint and hero are so unusual and their actions so unexpected. The moral ideal that these individuals and their actions represent is also attained through the exceptional resistance to self-interest and fear, a resistance which is avoided by most people because of the discomfort and pain accompanying such conduct. The moral perfection of the saint or hero would then not naturally be sought after as a model of behavior by most people, although they are highly admired. Urmson, too, therefore shows a lack of any real understanding of moral perfection as a valuable standard that enhances the worth of every human being, not just a few.

Owen Flanagan's essay is particularly ridiculous as he finds it so difficult to commit to any consistent, stable view of what moral perfection is that he systematically argues the moral and moral philosophy out of existence altogether, concluding that morality simply cannot be defined in such an individualistic and pluralistic society such as ours. Human beings vary so greatly and their many points of view diverge so broadly that the competing claims of what is good and best cannot possibly be resolved under any single conception of morality. Moreover, Flanagan's essay clearly illustrates how highly modern Western society values this multiplicity of views in a way that resists finding any kind of moral consensus. Flanagan, therefore, erroneously and unwittingly permits a dangerous corruption of moral goodness, calling such corruption acceptable and even admirable. Finally, Antony Duff's essay is a bizarre mixture of various philosophies, a kind of Kantian neo-Platonism which is a clear example of the chaotic and fragmented overlay of moral traditions that Alasdair MacIntyre refers to in *After Virtue*. Although Duff enthusiastically embraces moral perfection as a positive ideal, his portrait of the
morally perfect person as coldly detached and dead to the world depicts a very abnormal human being and human life, as well as a thoroughly uninspiring and uninviting ideal.

The thought of these four moral philosophers and their rejection of moral perfection reflects the influence of another tradition—modern liberalism, the prominent philosophy underlying much of the moral, legal, and political thought of modern times in the Western world. Liberalism has evolved from ideas which developed in the Enlightenment and from philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill, Kant, Hume, and most recently John Rawls. It is primarily a deontological ethic whereby principles of morality are founded upon moral rights that arise from moral rules and laws of obligation and duty. In the case of liberalism, the focal moral principles are the primacy of justice in all moral and political ideals and the supreme sanctity of individual rights. Modern liberalism demands that justice, as the standard by which all values are assessed and regulated, be considered prior to all other values; it derives and is justified by no other value or conception of the good. Within this context of justice, one must therefore seek out the right rather than the good, for conceptions of what constitutes the good differ so widely among people that only in this way can individual rights and freedom be secured equally for all. No one point of view of the good can be imposed upon others. Hence, justice is an end in itself, separate and independent from all conceptions of the good, and it is justice which actually defines and limits the good, in opposition to teleology where a particular good is prior to all.

Parallel with the independence of justice, the separation of the right from the good, and the priority of the right over the good is liberalism's insistence upon the autonomy of the individual self, which is also separate and independent from its values and ends. The self is considered to be prior to the objects of the world and,
therefore, detached from objective experience and surrounding circumstance in a way which allows the human being complete and absolute freedom to choose and pursue his various individual needs and ends, however he wishes in accordance with his own private conception of the good; that is, as long as he is not unjust. So completely free is this autonomous self that one's identity cannot be described by one's own values or ends, or even in any way by one's personal attributes and possessions. In liberal theory the absolute freedom to choose is considered to be far more important in securing justice and in doing what is right than the particular ends to which one would choose to aspire, and therefore attributes of the self and its ends have no relevance. The liberal perspective attempts to maintain a neutral stance indifferent to theories of human nature and the meaning of a good life and simply is concerned with promoting a justice which will fairly harmonize the rights of all. The individual thus can choose to construct his own meaning from a world that has no prior moral order or value which can be forced upon him against his will. In this way an individual is presumably completely free to express his own true nature and is also assumed to be free from contingency and happenstance which would compromise this ultimate freedom to choose his own fate. Individualistic values and the differences among people therefore become paramount and are not to be violated or coerced.

When these fundamentals of liberal philosophy are known it becomes much easier to understand how philosophers such as Susan Wolf think as they do and just how they are confused about moral perfection. Wolf and Flanagan, in particular, seem strangely influenced by liberal theories. In their essays one senses a strong resistance to having to adhere to any standard of the good outside of the individual self, for both of these thinkers defend their thesis in terms of the overriding importance of individual choice and values. They retreat quickly, almost
instinctively, from the morally ideal and protest mightily what appears to them in moral perfection to be a coerced value system. It is as if they were saying, "no one can tell me how to live my life, except my own self," a self which is automatically assumed to be the autonomous liberal self. Michael J. Sandel's critique of liberalism, however, has pointed out the major flaws in liberal theory, illustrating the deficiencies in these modern moral philosopher's arguments. These criticisms also invite a consideration of Aristotle and a standard of moral perfection.

Justice is primary in liberal philosophy because of the desire to accommodate or eliminate the tension which arises from the plurality inherent in the human race. Because of the many natural differences among people, the potential for conflict is always present. Justice as fairness and co-operation is therefore essential if one wants to live in a peaceful society. Sandel, however, argues that the justice liberalism envisions is flawed because the distance it requires we stand from our human circumstance in order to gain the proper neutrality and independence from our ends and attachments and thus become freely choosing agents goes too far, that is, it is too extreme, creating severe disadvantages which outweigh the advantages liberal theory claims this distancing provides. He asserts that we are not truly liberated and empowered to choose, as liberal theory promises, but instead dispossessed, disempowered, and prevented from any meaningful self-reflection and consequent self-knowledge which would broaden and deepen our character and moral worth. Liberalism fails both in its theoretical foundations and, practically, in its application to our actual moral experience.

Modern liberalism's conception of the totally autonomous self--"the author of the only moral meaning there is"—means, according to Sandel, that the self must stand at a certain distance from itself, unencumbered by what he calls "constitutive attachments," those attributes of the self which partly define, or "make up" one's
identity, such as enduring loyalties, convictions, interests, personal history and connections to family, friends, community, and nation. This disencumberance and detachment of the personal self is an especially recent addition to the liberal tradition, yet it reflects the deontological world view which sees the universe, that which is outside the self, as a place with no purposeful order, no intrinsic meaning, and therefore, detached from any significant connection with the self. The subjective self must then construct the only reality and order there can be. Sandel claims, however, that being so detached and "stripped of constitutive attachments," in reality, disempowers the individual. With one's choices constrained by antecedently derived principles of justice which appear to come from nowhere, and which are so detached from the context of one's actual human circumstances in the world, one does not truly construct the right or make meaning of the world, or choose one's own ends; instead, one is involved merely in deliberating and choosing among personal preferences and attempting to satisfy one's various desires as best one can according to the circumstances at hand, with little differentiation as to their moral worth. Although such preferential choice is intended to give a sense of control over one's life, unfortunately, it serves instead to bring a superficiality and, ultimately, an unstable arbitrariness to one's life's choices. Since this independent self is also dispossessed of ownership of its personal attributes and talents as, according to Rawls' theory of liberalism, these belong to society to use for its benefit, one's independence is actually denied to one. Independence is, therefore, only an illusion. Moreover, any value for merit, considerations of desert, is nullified. Quality of persons appears to have very little meaning in liberal theory, or, at least, a much lower priority, since all attention is directed toward whatever furthers the principles of justice agreed upon by the society, and judgments based upon merit are seen as unfair and unjust, a violation of the principles of liberal
democratic equality, or egalitarianism.

The focus in liberal theory and in the liberal conception of the self is, therefore, always outward in its attempt to construct meaning and order in the universe outside of the self. Yet, as Sandel points out, no consideration is given to the total context of our human circumstance, or the moral worth of the ends we choose, or the intrinsic quality of the persons we are. There is, in short, no accompanying balance of looking inward to who one is in any serious, deep, and abiding sense, but only a view toward and a choosing among what one has and wants. Hence, from a liberal perspective, our life in the world consists primarily of our products of choice, which remain apart from a very private and unknowable self, rather than interactions and engagements connected intimately and coherently with who we are as unique individuals. Sandel thus argues that liberalism fails to describe properly our moral experience. We lose too much of moral significance when we stand so far apart from those aims and attachments which continually engage and transform us throughout our lives and are so crucial to understanding ourselves in any deep sense. "To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments such as these," Sandel remarks, "is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth."21 To be a person of character and to have moral depth, he goes on to explain, requires the capacity for self-reflection; but in liberal theory, "where the self is unencumbered and essentially dispossessed, no person is left for self-reflection to reflect upon."22

When acting out of qualities of character, our choices of ends and the good tend not to be arbitrary, but are shaped according to constant reference to and re-examination of our individual identities, which are inescapably made up to a large extent of our diverse "constitutive attachments." those particular conditions and
surrounding circumstances of our experience and existence which partly define who we are as distinct individuals. Sandel therefore concludes that we cannot and should not stand apart from these vital parts of ourselves because throughout a lifetime of continually inquiring within upon the nature of one's self and the self's relationship to its attachments amid surrounding circumstances allows for a deeper, more complete self-understanding and a firm, more stable knowing of one's place in the world, the moral implications and responsibilities one incurs within it. This moral "self-searching" and self-knowledge develops the capacity for moral depth, which can only enhance the quality and, therefore, the meaning of our moral decisions and choices. Finally, it enhances the quality of ourselves as persons, and our lives. It is this attention and concern for moral quality which liberalism tends to neglect and which weakens considerably its value as a moral theory.

Liberalism is also severely weakened in its use as a moral theory by its aim to eliminate or contain conflict. Susan Mendus notes that although liberal theory was "born of conflict" and fully acknowledges that there are conflicting values which are incompatible and irreconcilable, it nevertheless attempts to "tame" conflict in ways which ironically tend to deny its significance. It does this, she says, in two ways: first, by separating the public from the private and privileging the public domain in any conflict between the two, and second, by substituting principles of justice for the operation of fate. By fate, Mendus means the operation of contingency and those factors in life and the world which we cannot control.

According to liberal theory, in private life the individual is free to pursue his own conception of the good, but in public life all conceptions of the good must serve principles of the right, or justice. Justice must therefore always "win" whenever these values conflict. Thus, in actuality, the priority of justice tends to deny that the world is made up of a plurality of diverse and conflicting values, for by valuing
justice so exclusively above all other values, as it does in prefering the public sphere over the private, liberalism refuses to acknowledge the authority of the opposing claim, and it is as if the opposition ceases to exist. The resolution of the conflict is then, in a certain sense, incomplete, since there is a failure to recognize the value of what is lost on the opposing side; it denies a consideration of a whole moral truth and a vision of the total moral order. It is also true that the distinction between public justice and private moral values is not always so easily drawn. Mendus gives as a case in point the example of the current abortion controversy, a clear mix of public and private values and evidence of a pluralism about what is right and just.

Liberalism is also similarly mistaken in its attempts to make a clear distinction between injustice and misfortune. Famine, poverty, unemployment, and the vicissitudes of the stock market are defined by some as accidents of nature or the contingency of circumstance. Mendus, however, argues that these circumstances may also be a result of a particular political ideology, or the role one chooses to occupy in that political context. Liberalism, she says, tends "to desire to rid the world of such random forces and to deny that we are, any longer, under the thrall of circumstances which are outside our control."24 Such an attitude is valuable when an acknowledgement of the responsibility of political policy can correct disaster and misfortune, but it is dangerous to believe that we can escape all disaster and the contingency of circumstance, or fate. With such a belief, Mendus' argument implies that, again, we will discard something of value and corrupt our attitude toward the moral world and our place in it, for this belief allows liberalism to declare conflicts for which we cannot find solutions as therefore necessary and just, or not unjust. Poverty in the Third World, Mendus explains, can therefore be deemed just, which is a tragic and cruel misinterpretation of justice. She suggests that justice cannot always be the ultimate solution, that, at times, our sense of justice
and injustice must be suspended, and that we must deal with the ambiguities of conflict and value more truthfully and with a much more wholesome awareness of their moral significance. By placing justice over all other values, we blind ourselves to a broader system of values, to a larger, more demanding moral order within which we exist and to which we are responsible, even when we are unable to completely understand or reconcile the conflicts inherent within it.

The influences of liberalism thus create serious deficiencies in modern moral theory. As we have seen, its tendency to separate and prioritize values in service of a supreme value—justice—is problematic. As the right is separated from the good, so the autonomous self is separated from its ends and values and any meaningful connection to the external world and objective circumstances, and thus, ultimately, from a larger moral truth and world order. Having been so disconnected from an external context and dispossessed of the knowledge of a stable and richly "constituted" self, an individual cannot make moral choices of a similarly rich and stable nature. By denying, in the name of justice, the natural tension between conflicting values inherent in the plurality of the world, liberalism has also removed the motivation to reflect deeply about moral issues and to acknowledge completely their significance; more importantly, it removes the struggle to search for the wisest and best of all possible moral choices. A moral vision described in such terms as this is therefore incomplete, showing as it does a lack of depth and quality, a lack which is surely reflected in the arguments of philosophers, such as Susan Wolf, who are influenced by liberal values. The moral vision contained in Aristotle’s ethics, however, to which I shall now turn, strives for completion and the depth of moral perfection, where the human being must reach toward the best that is within him to live the truly moral life.
Chapter 2

Aristotle's Concept of Moral Perfection

The objections to perfection that we have seen in the previous discussion about the essays of four modern moral philosophers appear to be two-fold. The first objection rejects moral perfection on the grounds that such a standard would mean that we all must be the same. If this is true, the philosophers appear to say, we would all lose our individuality having to adhere to a single standard of being. But everyone, they protest, is not the same, nor can they ever be; we are not equal in our attributes, natural talents, or life circumstances. Moreover, diversity enriches our world. Our differences and the tensions resulting from them give a vital creativity to life in the world. The second objection against moral perfection concerns the belief that perfection is an unattainable standard. The objectors reason that if the human being aspires to an unattainable ideal, he will be constantly frustrated with his inability to reach his goal. The ideal is therefore useless and unproductive, an unworkable solution to the problem of living well as a human being. Aristotle's concept of moral perfection, however, arises from a much more sound understanding of perfection. His moral theory responds to modern objections to perfection by admitting degrees of morality to standards of conduct; yet, it does this without accepting mediocrity or corrupting the moral good. As we shall see, Aristotle acknowledges and honors human diversity. There is value for each and every member of the human species in striving for the best that he can be.

We must therefore take the ideal of moral perfection seriously. What does moral perfection mean? Going back to the origin of the word 'perfect,' one comes
not to the ancient Greeks, but to the Romans and the Latin language. The word 'perfect' derives from the Latin compound *perfectus*, a participial form meaning "having been done through" or "made through," and by extension "having been completed," "finished," or "ended." Perfection thus denotes 'completion' in its most radical sense. How different moral perfection becomes when perfection is imaged in terms of completion! For completion also derives from a Latin compound, *compleo*, which means "to fill up," "to make full," or "to fulfill." With this idea of completion in mind, the image of perfection no longer draws the world together into a narrow, restrictive point, but instead it is as if the world suddenly opens up into the fullness of possibility, satisfaction, and abundance. Although our word 'perfection' comes to us via the Latin language and not the Greek, it is, nevertheless, this view of perfection understood as completed fulfillment which is the basis of moral perfection in Aristotle’s ethics and ancient Greek morality, and it is this meaning which makes all the difference in achieving the ideal.

In Book I of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle outlines his teleological view of human nature. In accordance with the universal natural law, all things aim at some good which is their own perfection, or completion—the end or τέλος for which the thing exists. The human being aims at εὐδαιμονία, which can be translated as "happiness," but is better understood in the Greek mentality as human flourishing, or human completion. Thus Aristotle defines this ultimate good for man in Book I, Chapter 7:

\[ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ποιεῖται κατ’ ἀρετὴν, εἰ δὲ πλείους αἱ ἀρεταὶ κατὰ τὴν ἀρίστην καὶ τελειωτάτην. ἔτι δ’ ἐν βίῳ τελείω. \]

The human good turns out to be an activity of the soul on the level of virtuosity and if there are several kinds of virtuosity, then on the level of the best and most perfect kind. Moreover, (this level and kind of activity must be carried on) in a complete life. (1098a16-18)
The Greek equivalent of the Latin *perfectus*, from which our word 'perfect' comes, is τελειος and is used here in Aristotle's definition twice, translated both by "perfect" and "complete." The term translated as "best"--ἀριστην--is also related etymologically to ἀρετήν, which is rendered in this translation as "virtuosity." The human good is thus closely associated with conceptions of perfection, completion, virtuosity, and the best. By activity of the soul, Aristotle means activity of those parts of the soul that participate in a rational principle, that capacity of the human being which sets the human being apart from all other living things. In short, the human being fully realizes his happiness, that is, his intended potential and completeness as a human being, through a virtuosity of his skill in being a human being--a virtuosity which is performed at the highest level and in its most complete form.

What then, for Aristotle, constitutes completeness as a human being? How does the human being achieve virtuosity in being human? In this first book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle declares that the function of the human being is more than just living. Ultimately, it is to live the active life of the rational part of the human being, or literally, in the Greek, "that part which possesses λόγος," or "articulate reason" (1098a3-4). This rational part, however, is divided between two natural aspects in the human soul (ψυχή). It should be noted that in the Greek, 'soul' has a much broader application than simply 'soul' or 'mind,' for it represents "the whole vitality of any living creature." The soul therefore encompasses the total life spirit of the human being. It is then a much fuller and richer understanding of the soul than that associated with the Christian conception. Aristotle describes this life spirit, or soul, as consisting of two parts--a non-rational and a rational element, both of which are further divided into parts.
The non-rational part of the soul is also divided into two parts: one part that causes nutrition and growth which is common to all living things, but which does not partake in \( \lambda \gamma \omega \zeta \), or a rational principle at all, and another part which is the appetitive or desiring part of the human soul. This desiring part does in fact participate in \( \lambda \gamma \omega \zeta \) in the sense that it can listen to and obey the rational principle; it can be persuaded and guided by the higher authority of reason and understanding residing in the purely rational part of the soul, that part which actually possesses and exercises \( \lambda \gamma \omega \zeta \) itself (1102a28-1103a3). As was made clear in his definition of happiness above, Aristotle emphasizes that one’s perfection or completion as a human being can only be achieved when the activity of the soul is performed at the level of virtuosity; for, as Aristotle believes, it is only by performing one’s function (as a human being) as best as one can that it is possible to reach one’s \( \tau \varepsilon \lambda \omega \zeta \) and fulfill one’s true human potential (1106a15-25). Because of the double division of the human soul, however, there is a corresponding division of human virtuosities which are derived from the two different parts. The intellectual virtuosities--such as theoretical wisdom, understanding, and practical wisdom--virtuosities of thought and understanding, develop from the purely rational element of the soul, that part which actually possesses \( \lambda \gamma \omega \zeta \) and has the capacity to reason and think things through (\( \tau \alpha \varsigma \ διανοητικάς \ \grave{\alpha} \rhoετάς \)). The moral virtuosities--such as gentleness, self-control, and courage--virtuosities of character (\( \tau \alpha \varsigma \ ήθικάς \ \grave{\alpha} \rhoετάς \)), arise from the non-rational, appetitive element of the human soul, the part which merely gives heed to and can obey the leadership of the rational element (1103a4-11). Moral virtue, or perfection, therefore, is a perfection of the desiring mode of the human being and is a subtle combination of rational and non-rational elements.

There are serious problems with Aristotle’s account of the parts of the human
soul in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There are inconsistencies in his various descriptions and we must assume much of which we cannot be sure. It is important, however, to understand in a general way Aristotle's concept of human psychology because he bases his account of human virtuosity on the development of a virtuosity of these various aspects of the human soul. Moreover, because the human soul is viewed as a total life spirit and because Aristotle describes the aspects of the soul that in particular define our "humanness" as aspects that operate together, he succeeds in giving a wholeness and depth to moral perfection and the human being in a way in which other moral theories cannot. The quality of the "humanness" of the human being is a nebulous one and difficult to translate adequately into words. This difficulty is reflected in Aristotle's account of the soul, its various aspects and their corresponding virtuosities. Because Aristotle must talk about the rational element in the human being as a fundamental part of moral life, it is easy to over-intellectualize Aristotle's ethics, turning the human being into a machine that constantly calculates what is good to do and what is not. By interpreting Aristotle in this way, one loses what is most valuable in Aristotle's ethical theory and also what is most valuable and human in the human being. Moral perfection, with an emphasis upon the moral, is foremost a virtuosity in being human, a virtuosity that includes a view of the human being that is whole and complete, rounded out and deepened by the complexity of moral character and worth.

Moral virtuosity is brought to perfection through the development and acquisition of appropriate habits and is not the result of teaching, as are the intellectual virtuosities. Aristotle points out the close connection these habits have to one's personal character by remarking that the word for "habit" (ἔθος) and the
word for "ethical" (ἡθικής), which is derived from the word for "character" (ἡθος), are related (1103a15-19). The quality of one's character, how one performs as a human being, is thus determined by constant practice and eventual habituation of virtuous activities. We do not naturally possess these good habits however, but only the capacity and potential to form them; and therefore, Aristotle states that this innate potential can only be realized through practice in acting in accordance with right reason (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον πράττειν 1103b33), until finally these habits become fixed as a disposition of mind and character (ἐξίς). As fixed habits, virtuous activities are then so ingrained that they can be performed as if they had been done without thinking (1103a19ff). Moreover, because some degree of pleasure or pain accompanies every human emotion and activity, pleasure and pain are intimately connected with our habituating ourselves to perform virtuous actions. It is, Aristotle says, because of the pursuit of and avoidance of the wrong kind of pleasures and pains, or by going about this in the wrong way, that human beings become corrupt (φαύλοι) (1104b21-22). Before we have become properly habituated in virtuous activity, pleasure will cause us to perform base actions and the avoidance of pain will keep us from performing noble and good actions (1104b10-12). We must be trained from childhood, Aristotle argues, to feel pleasure and pain at the proper things (1104b12-14). We must receive a correct education, one which will help guide us to make choices conducive to fulfilling our proper function and completion as human beings.

In Book VI of his Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle clarifies what he means by "acting in accordance with right reason," explaining how this relates to our human virtuosity. He describes the parts and divisions of the strictly rational part of the human soul and the corresponding intellectual virtues. As with the non-rational
element of the soul, the rational element also consists of two divisions; one part which apprehends fundamental, eternal, and invariable facts and principles of reality, and a second part which apprehends the contingent and variable principles. These faculties are also called, respectively, the scientific, or the faculty having to do with knowledge (ἐπιστημονικόν) and the calculative, or deliberative (λογιστικόν), while the virtuosities which develop from each are correspondingly called theoretical wisdom (σοφία) and practical wisdom (φρόνησις). Both kinds of wisdom function through reasoning processes, since, as was mentioned above, they both possess λόγος in the strict sense. In the human soul these two intellectual elements together, as well as sensation and desire, control human actions, yet the ultimate purpose of the intellectual faculties is the attainment of truth (1139α1-20)—the truth of both unchanging and changing perspectives of reality. The rational aspect of the human being, therefore, seeks out truth, that is, conformity with the facts of experience and reality. Moreover, the fact that the attainment of truth is the purpose of these particular aspects of the human soul which define our "human" nature implies that Aristotle intends for the human being to acquire a moral depth of integrity, honesty, and sincerity in his actions by means of these faculties of the human soul.

As is implied in the word "practical" which comes from the ancient Greek word for action (πράξις), practical wisdom (φρόνησις) is directed toward human action. It is the rational faculty specifically concerned with truth in moral conduct—how and when we should act or not act in order to do what is just, noble, and good. Choice, Aristotle asserts, is the cause of all action, while the cause of choice is desire and reasoning aligned together toward some end. Aristotle further explains that for our moral conduct to be truly good, our choice must also be good
(σπουδαίον)—good, that is, in the sense of reflecting an earnest and serious attitude toward attaining what is truly good and important in life.\textsuperscript{31} It therefore follows that if our choices are to be good, our reasoning (λογος) must be true and our desire correct. Our reasoning must affirm what our desire directs us toward. Practical wisdom is this ability to discern truth in harmony with correct desire, that desire for the particular pleasures which may be obtained in pursuing the highest human good, namely, fulfillment and completion as a human being (1139a21-1139b13).

Practical wisdom, then, is concerned with the right means to fulfill our proper human function and end. Aristotle insists that we cannot fulfill our essential function as human beings without practical wisdom and that we cannot acquire practical wisdom without moral virtuosity, for moral virtuosity enables us to choose the right ends, while practical wisdom makes us choose the right and appropriate actions conducive to those ends (1144a6ff). Aristotle often alludes to the image of the archer and his target when he speaks of this relationship. The target is the ultimate human good and it must be clearly visible to the archer for him properly to aim his bow and arrow and hit the target. The experience and skill with which the archer uses his bow and hits the bullseye with his arrow functions similarly to practical wisdom as it finds the target of the human good moral virtuosity provides. This inseparable combination of moral virtuosity, the capacity to know and choose the good, and practical wisdom, the discernment of the right means to attain the good, is, in part, what Aristotle means by the phrase "acting in accordance with right reason." It is also what vice, or wickedness (μοχθορία), destroys, for only the truly good can know what the highest human good is, since wickedness distorts what is good and causes the human being to be mistaken about the fundamental principles of moral action (1144a33-37). The greater the degree of vice the less
clearly will the target of the good be seen and the human being will be much less able to aim at the appropriate end for his actions, being unable even to know how to act to hit and achieve the aim of living well as a human being.

Since there may be many different means to an end, practical wisdom is the ability to deliberate well about the particulars of a circumstance and choose the best possible means to an end which is both good and advantageous for oneself in the immediate circumstances and for oneself as a human being. Yet, practical wisdom is much more than simply the ability to discern the right means to the right ends. Practical wisdom, Aristotle states cryptically, is also not merely intellectual and rational (1140b28-30), although he demonstrates that it qualifies as the virtuosity which belongs to the intellectual and calculative part of the human soul. In Chapter 12 of Book VI Aristotle asks of what use is practical wisdom in the moral life of the human being, as if he himself is puzzled about the relationship between the moral and intellectual parts of the human being. Simply by knowing what is good and just does not make one more capable of acting good and just, he says. Moral virtuosity is a habit of character; the good person will therefore be good naturally, he will not need to ask the advice of his practical wisdom in order to perform noble and just actions. Moreover, in the following chapter, Chapter 13, Aristotle describes how it is possible to perform actions as a morally good person should, and yet not actually be just and good, as, for example, when someone does what is good and right unwillingly or in ignorance. This is a kind of false, "accidental" morality. In such cases a person clearly does not perform his actions from choice or for the sake of the acts themselves, two motivations which for Aristotle are crucial criteria for true goodness. The relationship between practical wisdom and moral character is obviously a complicated one; however, it is upon this intricate relationship that
the human significance of moral goodness and perfection lies.

At the end of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle has decided that practical wisdom does indeed produce a moral effect. As he has stated previously both practical wisdom and moral virtuosity fulfill the nature of the human being by completing his true function as a human being. Literally, in the Greek, we can see Aristotle's image of the archer aiming surely and confidently at his target, as he says moral virtuosity "makes the mark (target) right (τὸν σκοπὸν τωεὶ ὀρθῶν), while practical wisdom makes the means to the mark (τὰ πρὸς τοῦτον) right (1144a8).

But Aristotle says there is also something more beyond this particular sense of moral virtuosity and practical wisdom. He now speaks of virtuosity and goodness in what he calls the true, full sense (κυρία 1144b4). Everyone, Aristotle explains, is born with the capacity for a natural kind of moral virtuosity, moral qualities which we already possess at birth. In order to possess a higher quality of moral goodness, one which expresses itself in the true, full sense of a completely developed moral virtuosity, there must, however, be the addition of some intellectual awareness, or intelligence, in moral conduct in order for us to choose our actions for the sake of the acts themselves (1144a1ff). Aristotle insists, therefore, that a perfected moral virtuosity is not only performed in accordance with right reason (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), or practical wisdom, but that it is actually united with, or co-operates with this rational principle (μετὰ ὀρθῶν λόγων 1144b26-30). Socrates was mistaken, Aristotle declares, when he said that all the moral virtues are forms of practical wisdom, although he was right in saying that they cannot exist without practical wisdom (1144a18). By closely uniting virtuositites of parts of the rational and non-rational aspects of the human soul, Aristotle makes moral action more complete and whole, reflecting more fully the humanness of our human nature. In other words,
to be completely and fully manifested in its perfected form, moral virtuosity, or
goodness, cannot be simply a blind habit that one performs. There must be a kind
of conscious mindfulness to doing good, in a way which exhibits our humanity at its
best.

Much of the force of Aristotle’s meaning in these passages is contained in the
word κύριος which he uses to characterize this most genuine form of human
virtuosity. The word itself recalls a famous passage in Aristotle’s Politics. 33
Aristotle is discussing the members of the household and household management.
He is wondering about the moral virtuosity of slaves, women, and children. They
are human beings after all, he muses, and so they must also have moral virtuosties.
But he asks, of what sort are they? Aristotle decides that there are differences in
the virtuosities of the ruler and those who are ruled, just as, he says, the parts of the
soul that by nature rule and are ruled are different and have different virtuosities.
There are naturally various classes of rulers and the ruled, hence Aristotle states:

\[\text{ἐλλογ νὰρ τρόπον τὸ ἐλευθερον τοῦ δούλου ἀρχει καὶ τὸ ἀρτρον τοῦ θήλεος καὶ
ἀνήρ παιδός. καὶ πᾶσιν ἐνυπάρχει μὲν τὰ μόρια τῆς ψυχῆς, ἀλλ᾽ ἐνυπάρχει
διαφερόμενος. ὃ μὲν γὰρ δοῦλος ἀλλως οὐκ ἔχει τὸ βουλευτικόν, τὸ δὲ θήλη
ἔχει μὲν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐκυπρον, ὃ δὲ παῖς ἔχει μὲν, ἀλλ᾽ ἀτελές.}\]

For the free rules the slave, the male the female, and the man the child in a
different way. And all possess the various parts of the soul, but possess them
in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the
female has it, but without full authority, while the child has it, but in an
undeveloped form. (1260a10-14)

This is, of course, a very controversial passage in this day and age. Many are
offended by Aristotle’s attitude on slavery and women. However, he was a man of
his times and influenced by his own cultural context. More will be said about this
below. Nevertheless, the offensiveness should not detract from the importance of
the passage to an understanding of moral virtuosity in the full, true sense noted by
Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, nor to the value of Aristotle’s ethics as a whole. The slave is the least free, therefore he is totally deficient in the ruling part of the soul (and we assume the corresponding virtuosity)—the deliberative. The female has this part, but it is ἄκυρος, an alpha-privative form of the adjective κύριος which negates its meaning. The ruling part of the woman’s soul exists, but it is not authoritative, not full or complete in the highest sense, a completeness which is manifested only in the ruler—the male and master of the household in this passage. The woman in her nature as a woman does not exercise the deliberative part of the soul as completely or as commandingly as the male, her husband in the household, although she has the capacity to do so. Aristotle believes this deliberative part of the soul in a woman is not, however, as fully activated or as dominant as what is found in the soul of a ruler. The child, of course, is as yet undeveloped and incomplete by nature of his being a child, an immature human being. The parts of his soul and their corresponding virtuosities will also be similarly immature.

This hierarchical scheme of degrees of completeness in the activity of the parts of the human soul also correspond to the completeness of moral virtuosity as it manifests in moral activity. The highest, most complete virtuosity—practical wisdom united and operating together with genuine goodness of character—is most praiseworthy, demonstrating a quality of moral conduct and character which is the human best. Other degrees of moral virtuosity—qualities of character and action that are truly praiseworthy within their own specific nature and circumstance—may yet be characterized as less supreme and complete because the particular virtuosity has the capacity to be exercised at what Aristotle considers to be an even higher level of activity and completeness. This is not to suggest that we should think that women, children, and slaves are inferior as human beings, but we need to
understand that the moral virtuocities do vary, becoming less or more praiseworthy as they exhibit, or do not exhibit, higher degrees of development and fulfilment of our human nature. This must be emphasized because it would be a mistake to understand Aristotle’s moral theory as a theory which advocates accepting the mediocre as a standard for moral conduct, simply because Aristotle does admit a certain range of conduct that can be defined as virtuous.

Aristotle tries to illustrate this point by comparing cleverness with practical wisdom, a comparison that he states is similar to the relationship of our natural moral virtuosity to that which is most true and most fully expressive of our human virtuosity (NE VI.12 1144a25ff). Cleverness (δινότης) is a praiseworthy human trait. It also devises means to ends as does practical wisdom, and as such cleverness is therefore very similar to practical wisdom in the same way our natural virtuosity is similar to a more supreme, fully developed moral virtuosity. If a person’s cleverness is used for base purposes, it is clearly inferior to practical wisdom and no longer praiseworthy. Practical wisdom cannot be defined as practical wisdom without its interaction with true moral virtuosity. The genuinely good person will not aim at base goals, his moral wisdom will not allow him to exercise base means to attain his ends. Whereas our natural moral virtuosity can resemble true virtue, it clearly is not so highly developed when compared with the actions of the person who chooses his acts with a full understanding of what he does, consciously deliberating his choices, choosing the acts because they are good and right, and acting in accord with his character.

Alasdair MacIntyre comments that Aristotle’s account of the relationship between practical wisdom and moral virtuosity is "notably elliptical and in need of paraphrase and interpretation." MacIntyre himself interprets Aristotle’s account
to mean that the deliberations of practical wisdom about what is best to do in a particular circumstance include deliberations that concern the moral agent's character, namely, judgments as to what is good for someone of his particular sort of character to do and to be; and that "an agent's capacity to make and act upon such judgments will depend upon what intellectual and moral virtues and vices compose his or her character." MacIntyre holds that, from the Aristotelian point of view, ethics is all about an "education of the passions" whereby theoretical reasoning provides the human being with the ability to identify his telos and therefore pursue it, while practical wisdom identifies the right action to perform in each particular time and place. He also recognizes that Aristotle describes an intimate relationship between the moral virtuosities and practical wisdom which creates a kind of moral life that is much more than a means to an end relationship, as he says:

But the exercise of the virtues is not in this sense a means to the end of the good for man. For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life. We thus cannot characterize the good for man adequately without already having made reference to the virtues.

MacIntyre also makes some enlightening remarks on the interrelationship of the moral and intellectual virtuosities in his interpretation of the way Aristotle describes our moral education, statements which bear directly on Aristotle's own conclusion about this interrelationship as discussed above. MacIntyre states:

As we transform our initial naturally given dispositions into virtues of character, we do so by gradually coming to exercise those dispositions kata ton orthon logon. The exercise of intelligence is what makes the crucial difference between a natural disposition of a certain kind and the corresponding virtue. Conversely the exercise of practical intelligence requires the presence of the virtues of character; otherwise it degenerates into or remains from the outset merely a certain cunning capacity for linking means to any end rather than to those ends which are genuine goods for man.
MacIntyre thus concludes that, according to Aristotle, the moral virtuosities of character cannot then be separated from intelligence (intellectual virtuosity). He adds that this is a view "at odds" with that prevailing now in the modern world, a view in which intelligence does not require knowledge of the good, nor goodness in the possessor. Modern social practices and theory disconnect and separate human character and the intellect.

While much of the moral significance, depth, and completeness which marks Aristotle's ethical theory comes from his emphasis on quality in moral conduct and quality of moral character, it is not immediately apparent that this insistence on quality is founded upon sound metaphysical assumptions. In his ideal of human flourishing, or completion, we see Aristotle's own biological metaphysics, where he envisions the human being much in the same way one views a growing plant. As a plant grows and develops, it pushes into the earth for nutrients and out toward the sun for energy, utilizing all of its capacities as a plant to mature fully and beautifully into the form it was meant to be. When it has reached its full potential after a lifespan of striving to be, the plant achieves completion or fulfillment. In Aristotle's ethics, the individual human being in his nature as a communal animal completes himself and flourishes by growing and maturing in a well-ordered community which nurtures him and enables him to form good habits and dispositions through the skilled use of his capacity for reason. This distinctively human power to think things through enables him to judge and choose appropriately what is the good and the best thing to do at any given moment. If a particular individual should choose not to pursue the highest human good in the use of his natural capacities and remain instead on what Aristotle describes as the level of a cow, in a life aimed only at sensual pleasure and immediate goals (1095b19-21), he fails to
achieve the moral, ethical life made available to him by nature as a human being. He can then be defined as morally imperfect in his denial of his own human birthright.④0

Underlying Aristotle's use of the term ἀρετή as virtuosity in his definition of human happiness are also vestiges of the Homeric warrior's moral code, a code which further reveals a deep connection for Aristotle with the cosmos. The Homeric warrior's purpose in life was to exhibit a supreme virtuosity on the battlefield, thus demonstrating an almost god-like perfection in himself and his craft as he constantly risked his own mortality in a dance with death. The warrior attached great importance to τίμη, honors given to him by his peers in acknowledgment of his superior prowess and expertise. Such an attachment to honor is considered a defect by Aristotle in his ethical system, as τίμη is not the highest human good. Hence, the failure of Agamemnon to treat Achilleus appropriately and Achilleus' resultant anger and its disastrous consequences can be seen as a moral failure of these two warriors to consider their highest human good and their own completion as human beings. In terms of being a human being, therefore, their warrior virtuosity, a virtuosity which aimed at achieving τίμη, was a misguided ἀρετή and their failure to prevent a tragic catastrophe reveals this fundamental error.

The ultimate goal of the warrior, however, was also to experience the divine joy of εὐδαιμονία—happiness—through his virtuosity on the battlefield. Aristotle, therefore, takes this same heroic spirit of the Homeric warrior of constantly striving to realize one's fullest potential through a manifestation of ἀρετή, or virtuosity, in one's actions on the battlefield and places it into the life of the human soul, and thus into the moral activity and life of the human being. Ἀρετή then for Aristotle
becomes an essential part of what it means to be a human being. It is only by achieving ἀρετή that perfection is attained because only through ἀρετή can a human being become complete, since if anything does its function as best as it can be done, according to Aristotle, it reaches its proper τέλος; it fulfills its true nature and purpose in accordance with cosmic Nature's own final purpose. Finally, this most complete, and therefore perfect, virtuosity which fulfills the human being as a human being also gives the highest pleasure and joy for the human being, since it resonates so certainly with the ultimate nature of all things.41

While the ultimate purpose of the warrior was to experience the joy of εὐδαιμονία, his heroic striving toward supreme virtuosity was actually motivated by his acute awareness of death—the brief and limited mortality of the human being. The warrior's aspiration toward perfection was, therefore, also an attempt to transcend this mortality, to overcome death while risking his life constantly in battle and, hence, to find meaning in the face of the eternal emptiness and meaninglessness of death. Through the immortal fame won for the glory of his virtuosity and achievement, and the honor and respect which came from the members of his human community, the warrior could achieve acknowledgment of his worth in the eyes of his society and a meaningfulness in his own personal life; while in the fulfillment of his ἀρετή, the beauty and nobility of his "bestness" which was in perfect accord with nature's most fundamental law, the warrior could, at the same time, also achieve a kind of acknowledgment from nature itself as he attained the closest thing to divinity to which a human being could aspire, and for a brief moment in the joy of εὐδαιμονία actually defeat death with his god-like perfection.42

Aristotle does not explain in his ethics why perfection is the natural order of things. Because the concept is so much a part of his cultural tradition, Aristotle
assumes that the reason this is so is obvious, and we, who are now far from the ancient Greek tradition, can only find the answer by way of vague allusions in his text. Aristotle writes that happiness—εὐδαιμονία—is the best of man's possessions and one of the most divine things that exists, for the prize and end (τέλος) of virtuosity must be the highest good and something god-like and blessed (1099b11-13). Here, he is assuming that doing one's best must deserve the best, as is observed in the Homeric warriors' code of conduct. As his reason for these assumptions, Aristotle states that the things in nature have a natural tendency to be ordered to be the most beautiful, or in the best possible way (εἰπερ τὰ κατὰ φύσιν, ὡς οἶν τε κάλλιστα ἔχειν, οὕτω πέφυκεν 1099b20-23). In this statement is the principle underlying the whole of Aristotle's teleology and ethical theory; that is, that nature is ordered and is purposeful, this natural order being designed for the purpose of being "the most beautiful" (καλλιστα), which is also the best. In his observations of nature Aristotle had observed this recurrent pattern that if something achieves its τέλος, its perfection and completion—happiness, or successful flourishing, in the case of the human being—it is expressing the "most beautiful" in its own nature of being, and thereby complying with and fulfilling what has been mandated by the order of nature, coming into harmony with the fundamental aim of the entire cosmos.

For Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, perfection is therefore the highest and fullest expression of τὸ καλὸν—the beautiful. And as Aristotle had, again, observed in the operation of nature, perfection in the human being can only be achieved by a conscious and deliberate striving toward the goal of completion, a striving which is performed at the highest level, at its best with the highest degree of virtuosity possible. In the Greek, the adjective καλὸς denotes what is simultaneously
beautiful, noble, good, and therefore right. Expressing \( \tau \kappa \alpha \lambda \nu \) in one's actions is, therefore, automatically what is right, and it is then of necessity what one is obligated to do for right moral conduct. Because what is beautiful—\( \tau \kappa \alpha \lambda \nu \)—is so deeply rooted in the operation of nature, it is also what is, most deeply, the good and truth in the nature of things as well, and if our conduct is in true accord with this nature, it naturally follows that our actions are also correspondingly and most fundamentally good and true. Expression of \( \tau \kappa \alpha \lambda \nu \) in human life is thus the very essence of morality in the ancient Greek tradition and in Aristotle's ethics.\(^45\)

Another fundamental assumption of the ancient Greek tradition explains further why beauty and perfection, or completeness, in virtuosity is the ultimate purpose and good of nature. This assumption has been expressed most clearly by Plato in his *Philebus* where he states that "the power of the good is to be found in the nature of the beautiful; for measure and measuredness constitute beauty and \( \alpha \rho \epsilon \tau \eta \gamma \) everywhere" (κατακτάφειν ἡμῖν ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ δύναμις εἰς τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ φύσιν. μετριότης γάρ καὶ συμμετρία κάλλος δήπον καὶ \( \alpha \rho \epsilon \tau \eta \) παντοχοῦ ἐμβαίνει γίγνεσθαι *Philebus* 64b5-7). The good and the beautiful is thus a symmetry of a just right measuredness, or proportion in things—a kind of poise where the human being finds perfection in himself and in his harmony with the universe. It only remains for the human being to determine this proportion in order to guide his conduct in accord with it and express what is beautiful, good, right, and true in his deepest nature, achieving ultimate completion as a human being thereby.\(^46\) It is this process of determining the just right measure which underlies Aristotle’s theories of practical wisdom and moral virtuosity discussed above and which will be further explained below in a discussion of his doctrine of the mean.

How then, one may ask, does one obtain such a high degree of virtuosity, such
as will lead to human completion? Must we become like the Homeric warrior, Olympic champions of human virtuosity obsessed with the good in order to be truly moral and reach the human good and be happy? The warrior image underlying Aristotle's account of moral perfection as the manifestation of ἀρετή can make moral perfection seem a particularly unattainable ideal. This warrior standard seems set much too high for ordinary mortals even to hope to attain. At this point Aristotle's version of moral perfection might seem to be little different from being required to become a saint or hero for our moral goodness' sake, as Susan Wolf, or J.O. Urmson suggested. Ethics, however, is a practical science, as Aristotle repeatedly states, and in Book II of his *Nicomachean Ethics* he gives us his formula for moral success in what scholars call his doctrine of the mean, a formula which is decidedly human, not god-like; it is practical, wise, and certainly attainable if one chooses to practice it. It reveals as well that Aristotle's ethics promote a particularly well-rounded and well-balanced conception of moral perfection to which every human being may aspire, and not just the Homeric warrior.

Moral virtuosity develops and matures through practice of the various moral virtuosities, for as with anything else, one learns best by doing. "It is," Aristotle says, "by playing the harp that men become both good and bad harpists" (1103b13). Likewise, through correct practice, the correct habits are acquired which establish the proper attitudes of mind, or dispositions of character, toward our human emotions and actions. In time these habits become spontaneous and natural, in a sense enabling the human being to "play" himself as he would a musical instrument, becoming expert--a virtuoso--at always choosing and achieving the just right measure, the correct proportion of feeling or action required for living well and being good as a human being. Our standard of performance is, according to
Aristotle, the moderate amount—the best amount—of feeling and action. It is the mean between extremes of excess and deficiency, extremes which would destroy the quality of our feelings or actions and cause them to become vice (1106b10ff). For example, a person who is too confident and bold in his habits becomes reckless, while the one who is so lacking in confidence that he is always fearful becomes cowardly (1107b1-4). By repeatedly achieving the mean amount of fear and confidence, neither too much nor too little for his circumstances, a person exhibits courage, a characteristic which is praiseworthy and brings goodness and success to one's life and person.

In this way Aristotle extols the value of the mean in human moral behavior. The mean is always the proper amount and is to be praised, while extremes are neither praiseworthy or right; on the contrary, they are worthy of blame (1107a15). The proper median in human behavior, however, is not an absolute mean relative to the particular moral virtue, but a mean relative to the one who performs it and to the situation in which the act is performed. In an analogy to explain exactly what he means by this kind of moral median, Aristotle discusses the proper amount of food for a man training in athletics. A certain amount may be too little for Milo, a wrestler of great renown and strength, but too much for someone new to the sport and just beginning his training (1106a26ff). The mean is therefore not the same for everyone. It is instead an individualized standard of perfection, but with absolute limits of too little and too much. The wrestler just beginning his training must find the amount of food appropriate for him as an individual and at his own particular level of physical fitness: Milo's portion is obviously outside of the proper limits for a beginning wrestler and would provide no benefit or advantage to a beginner. Similarly, the degree of fear or confidence displayed by one person in a particular
situation may not be the same as that exhibited by another, yet both could be
described as courageous when each person attains the mean amount of fear or
confidence for himself as an individual and within absolute limits of what can be
defined as too much or too little fear and confidence for any human being.
Moreover, although one person may be able to hit his mean more often and with
greater ease than another—as one assumes would be the case with the expert wrestler
Milo—as long as both persons achieve an appropriate and praiseworthy mean, they
both will be attaining some degree of moral virtuosity.

Aristotle makes it very clear, however, that at some point every action and
feeling reaches a limit of excess and deficiency; it becomes out of proportion and
therefore vice. He also asserts that there are some actions and feelings which have
no mean and are never praiseworthy. Such emotions as spite, shamelessness, and
envy, and similarly such actions as murder, adultery, and theft are bad in and of
themselves, having no excess and deficiency. It would be absurd to think
otherwise, Aristotle proclaims (1107a9ff). Aristotle’s version of moral perfection
in the doctrine of the mean, therefore, tolerates a certain degree of variability, but is
firm about absolute limits of unacceptable standards of conduct. We are not moral
failures if we cannot perform as Mother Theresa does, or as a Homeric warrior.
We need only aim at a mean which is within the range of our own individual
capacity for achieving completion as the best possible human being we can be.
Yet, although we do not have to aspire to a single, narrow vision of perfection, nor
to any self-defeating, god-like standard of perfection, Aristotle’s moral theory does
expect the human being to continually reach for the best and not to settle for
mediocrity in his moral conduct.

In the words in which Aristotle lays out his doctrine of the mean there are
nevertheless no signs of a rigid, inhuman, and unattractive perfectionism of the sort Susan Wolf and Owen Flanagan imply in their essays. On the contrary, Aristotle’s concepts exhibit a wise tolerance combined with a sturdy, reliable morality. He gives no exact rules to follow, but his picture of the perfectly moral is clearly defined. It is an artful, perfect poise in which one is balanced flexibly between what is judged to be too much and too little for each and every particular circumstance. Such a stance prepares one to meet confidently any unexpected contingency in life, unlike modern liberal moral theory which seeks to eliminate contingency and happenstance. Aristotle’s ideal is one of harmony and proper proportion, a mean which expresses the measuredness of the beautiful and the good inherent in nature and the truth of things. Human completeness is realized in the practice of human virtuosity as the appropriate choices are made to maintain this perfect balance between too much and too little, a balance which signifies the perfectly moral and what is most true in the nature of the particular circumstances as well as nature at large. Since Aristotle’s ideal of moral goodness is individualized within an individual’s own capacity for human completeness, as his doctrine of the mean clearly implies, then it would seem that Aristotle’s views are well defended against modern criticisms that only a saint or hero can be deemed perfectly moral.

Nancy Sherman’s essay "Common Sense and Uncommon Virtue" also defends Aristotle’s virtue ethics against charges of an unattainable perfectionism and moral sainthood. Aristotle’s emphasis on conscious intent, stable character, flexibility of action within the context of circumstance, and the spirit rather than the letter of the law in doing what is right shows that Aristotle’s conception of human goodness in everyday moral activity centers upon a standard of human decency. In his ethics the good person is often called ἐπεικῆς—decent, considerate, equitable. The decent
moral agent, the standard for decent behavior, is fair-minded, forgiving, sympathetic, and willing to take less than his fair share, if the interests of justice and decency are to be better served. Sherman also reminds us that the Aristotelian "moral virtues" include virtuocities of character and intellect, not just those traits required of altruistic behavior. Characteristics such as proper pride, humor, wit, and friendliness are very important in Aristotle’s vision of the morally ideal. The ideally good person, furthermore, does not have to be overly tolerant—the saint Susan Wolf describes who neglects his own needs and welfare for the sake of others—for Aristotle requires him to express his displeasure appropriately at excessive or offensive behavior. Sherman’s point is that Aristotle’s conception of perfection is very broad and rich; the human best includes not only being just and decent toward others, but also how one dispenses one’s moral goodness, the appropriateness to truth and proportion described by Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean. If Aristotle’s ethics thus call simply for what can be called a standard of human decency in human behavior, moral perfection is to be highly valued, and expected of every human being, not repudiated as an unattainable, or unattractive standard for moral sainthood.

Because Aristotle had observed the principle of perfection, or completion at work everywhere in nature, he had no doubt that a substantial degree of perfection was an attainable goal for the human being who was also an integral part of this same nature. Although he did believe without question that moral perfection could be attained by every human being whose capacity for virtuosity had not been maimed (1109b18), Aristotle also knew that it is not easy to attain the human best, the middle way of Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean. As Aristotle explains at the end of Book II of his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "There are many ways of going wrong, but
only one way which is right" and therefore, "it is easy to miss the target and
difficult to hit" (1106b29-35). In other words, it is very easy to become a bad
harpist, but more difficult and, by implication in this greater effort, of much higher
value to become a good harpist; and similarly, it is easy to be bad and much more
difficult and of higher value to become a good human being. In describing how to
attain these precious means, the marks of human virtuosity, Aristotle states that to
be good "to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, for the right
purpose and in the right way is not easy, nor is it within everyone's power, which is
why to hit the mean properly is something rare, praiseworthy and beautiful"
(1109a25-29).

Because a human being is viewed as being of higher value, something rare, and
worthy of praise by the fact of his being good, moral perfection for Aristotle,
therefore, necessitates a consideration and distinguishing of persons as to their
quality as human beings, a judgment about what makes one better and another
worse. There might seem to be a danger here of what people call being too
"judgmental" and arrogantly "elitist" in categorizing people as good or bad;
however, I do not believe that is the proper understanding of Aristotle's ethical
theory. It must be kept in mind that Aristotle was a biologist, his passion was for
the articulation and order of nature and its whole zoology, especially its beauty and
"rightness." Nothing was so humble in nature for Aristotle that it could not be held
in great awe because the manner of its being was seen to be so clearly an expression
of the beautiful and the divine in nature.48 Aristotle's thinking is often described as
"hierarchical" since he arranges and prioritizes goods and concepts into higher and
lower ranks and classes. This likely is a natural consequence of a study of the
natural order where one looks for standards of comparison among and within species
in order to evaluate their place in the order of things. The point at which a particular member of a species reaches the fullest expression of what it is and how it functions would naturally be a part of such a study of nature. The fact that Aristotle uses as his standard of perfection a doctrine of the mean which admits a great deal of variability and individuality indicates his attempt to find a wise and realistic appraisal of the way things naturally and truly are. Each species and each member of that species has its own nature with an individual potential each strives to complete. A bear and an owl would therefore not be expected to function the same way; nor would certain individual bears and owls as members of their respective species. Yet, the individual bear and owl still strive to fulfill the nature of their particular species, and are more or less successful as distinct individuals in achieving this aim in their different ways. That Aristotle's ethical principles would then be used by anyone to justify being too judgmental, inappropriately judging any human being, is clearly going a step beyond the limits of what is good and best, an extreme which is certainly contrary to the essence of Aristotle's ethics.

Aristotle's ethical thought is clearly an agent-emphasis theory as in his ethics moral behavior stems from character. In Book II, Chapter 4, of his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle describes how his ethics derive so essentially from character. In this chapter he discusses how it is that moral virtue is something more than simply performing acts that are just and good. One's acts should be more than mere products; the agent must also possess a certain state of mind when he acts. First, the agent must know what he is doing, that is, the act must be a conscious one where the agent knows he is doing the right thing; second, the agent must choose the act deliberately and for its own sake; and third, the agent must act from a firm and unchanging character. Of these three criteria, knowledge of the act is least
important, for in order to perform moral acts of true goodness, the goodness lies in the *doing* of them, not just in an intellectual knowing of what they are. Most importantly, Aristotle emphasizes that one’s actions must be performed in a particular way—the way a truly good person would do them (1105a26-1105b18)—that is, from the constancy and depth of the goodness in one’s character, a virtuosity in goodness which has become a fixed disposition (*ēξὶς*) of the mind or soul, established by repeated and habitual just and good acts.

It should be noted how Aristotle’s emphasis on character causes him to use the model of a particular type of person—a paradigm of human conduct—to indicate how a moral action is to be performed. The judge of what determines moral virtuosity is the man of practical wisdom—the *φρονιμος*. In Aristotle’s formal definition of moral virtuosity, he specifically refers the determination of what constitutes the proper mean in moral conduct to the *φρονιμος*. The mean, he says, is determined as the *φρονιμος* would determine it (ὡς δὲν ὁ φρονιμος δρόσειν 1106b36), that is, as the man of practical wisdom would judge and perform the mean. Moral virtuosity, hence perfection, is a habit which is a constituent of one’s character and arises from the "shape" of the individual human character. One’s actions are therefore inseparable from who one most truly and deeply is, just as inseparable as the overall quality of one’s actions is from the quality of one’s character.

Aristotle’s emphasis upon quality of action and character give his ethical theory a profound moral depth and stability. His ethics meld together the good and the right in human action and character so that his moral theory is grounded firmly in the intrinsic value of moral action and moral character, both in what kind or quality of action they produce, and even more in their value as ends in themselves. Good action, or faring well as a human being—*εὖ πράξων*—which for Aristotle is
synonymous with εὐδοκεῖνε or happiness, is, Aristotle declares, an end in itself. The virtuosities the human being develops in the parts of his soul are valuable as ends in themselves, he says, even if they are not used in action, simply because they are virtuosities. They are therefore desirable because a virtuosity of anything fulfills and completes that thing's function as nature intended (1145a2-5). In this way Aristotle avoids the tendency toward superficiality that we saw in modern liberal theory; however, because Aristotle's theory is character-based it also contains a certain ambiguity because such things as human character are difficult to define precisely or to codify in a set of rules. Aristotle appears to recognize the difficulty this presents, yet deliberately ignores the desire people have for exactness in his insistence upon following the rule of nature and incorporating the world of man within that nature as one of its natural elements. Aristotle implies that the fact that there is a certain ambiguity and impreciseness to what is required by nature is just the way things are in reality and that this fact of reality, furthermore, is an important means by which the human being develops his skill and virtuosity at being a human being; without the struggle to come to know how to become a good human being, attainment of the goal would have little value.

Aristotle assumes, however, that there is a normative standard for living well as a human being, and that this standard is what he thinks it is. Modern critics are more skeptical than Aristotle and often debate about what exactly constitutes living well as a human being, how human beings can flourish, and what criteria we should use to judge and criticize our human behavior. They ask if Aristotle's theories about ultimate human welfare can apply to all human beings in all cultures through time. Since there is so much variation in human behavior, how do we choose which is better or worse? Aristotle's own perception of what is good and valuable
was influenced by his cultural tradition, as we have already seen. Therefore, his theories are not likely to be universally applicable. Yet, Aristotle was very much aware of competing accounts of what constitutes human happiness (NE I.4 1095a14ff). It is also clear that he constructed his ethical principles broadly in order to account for the plurality of human experience. At the same time Aristotle's theory is not a species of relativism; not all choices for the human good are equally valid and true among cultures. His moral theory is sensitive to local social and cultural contexts, which gives it a degree of relativity, but Aristotle firmly holds that what is right and good in a local tradition must also be right absolutely and objectively anywhere in the human world. This may sound like a contradiction, but it reflects a tension that exists throughout the arguments in Aristotle's ethics as he describes a human good which is local and particular, in the context of his life in a polis, and at the same time cosmic and universal, as it relates to the world at large. Human nature is therefore in a sense both political and metaphysical and one's life reflects both spheres.

Martha Nussbaum argues cogently and eloquently that Aristotle's virtue ethics is an objective human morality, a moral theory suitable for general human flourishing in all cultures in all times. She believes that since Aristotle's theory often strives to accommodate both an objective account of the human good and human flourishing--our general humanity--and a reference to local traditions and practices, Aristotle's account of human morality combines the objective good and the relative good in a way which is "mutually supportive" and which is not incompatible. Nussbaum converts Aristotle's list of human virtuosities to generalized "spheres of human experience" in which any human being in all cultures and times must struggle to determine how to choose how to act or not act, well or badly. Differences in
human cultures are thus explained as simply different responses to the same common
human problems. The virtuosities that must be developed in order to cope with
these common experiences are also shared, even though they may superficially be
called by different names and described by a different cultural context. For
example, since ideas of what actions constitute courage are so variable in different
cultures, Nussbaum modifies Aristotle's virtue of courage into a sphere of human
experience she calls the fear of death, a fear which underlies the concept of courage
and which is a common problem all humans must face.

Nussbaum demonstrates that Aristotle's theories do adequately recognize the
underlying similarities between cultures and in our common humanity, and can,
therefore, be quite valuable in our search for the common human good in
contemporary life. She further gives evidence that Aristotle believed in ethical
progress, that local traditions should not be fixed and inflexible, and that unjust laws
anywhere should be open to revision. This is what Aristotle meant, Nussbaum
argues, when he stressed that the human being must always search for what is best
and good. Although difficult to accomplish, the goal is the same for us as it was in
Aristotle's time and culture, that is, to balance successfully generalities of universal
humanness with particular circumstances as we seek the truth and the good. The
general is therefore used as a guide, but priority is given to an understanding of the
particular in human moral behavior, for, as Aristotle realistically asserts, it is the
accurate judgment of the particulars of one's own context which enables one to
modify one's behavior in light of new and different circumstances, a skill at
assessment the value of which Aristotle's discussion of practical wisdom and moral
deliberation makes clear.50

Because Aristotle's theories value the diversity and complexity of human nature
and human culture, they can seem to be classifiable as a kind of pluralism or relativism; however, Aristotle also relies upon a generalized, universal, and objective human good and has such a high regard for the order of nature and what is natural, that such classifications are therefore inaccurate for Aristotle's philosophical thought. J.D.G. Evans has instead described Aristotle as a cultural realist, a category he calls a form of pluralism. Evans describes Aristotle's moral theory as a reconciliation of a debate begun by Aristotle's predecessors, between the Sophists and Socrates and his pupil Plato. At that time in ancient Greece the fact that there are a diversity of views and values among different groups of people was explained in terms of either nature or human convention. The Sophists supported human convention and valued relativism, the complexity and diversity of humankind, while Socrates and Plato were realists and emphasized human value, in particular promoting the importance of knowledge of true values. According to Evans, Plato ignored the social and cultural dimension of human life. Aristotle, however, integrates this social dimension by placing both nature and human convention into his theory of human nature and morality. He therefore keeps to the middle ground between extreme relativism and extreme universalism by advocating that we consider both absolute principles and contingent goods when we make our choices. Thus, for Aristotle some human practices are good from the perspective of the general nature of things while others require human convention or law to give them their appropriate value (NE V.7 1134b24-33).

According to Evans, it is especially significant that Aristotle recognized that nature itself is dynamic, that it is a mistake to assume nature is rigid and unchanging. This meant that Aristotle could include variability as a natural property and the variability of human convention and law as also a natural element
in the natural world order. Aristotle, Evans argues, tried to eliminate conflict between nature and convention by supplementing general law with principles of equity, judgments and insights about a general law which adapts it to a specific particular case, insuring that the law remains fair and just. Aristotle appraises human convention or law by how successful it is in maintaining true justice; therefore, he concludes that there are always better and worse possibilities and choices, and in each culture there is one that is in each case best. Evans points out, however, that this does not mean that Aristotle subscribed to the Sophists' view that convention is superior and determines what is best to do. In agreement with Nussbaum, Evans concludes that in Aristotle's theory the human agent must pursue the good relative to local cultural context; both cultural variation and objective value must be considered and are compatible. At times one or the other value--the universal or the particular--might be deemed more appropriate and preferred as more conducive to the final good in a particular circumstance, but neither necessarily will take precedence over the other, as both are essential elements in the natural scheme of things.51

The natural scheme of things also includes moral error. Aristotle gives a detailed discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* about what constitutes moral error, an effort which would appear to indicate that moral error is also a prominent factor in the life of the human being. It is obvious that Aristotle is trying to clarify the range of variability and the limits both of virtue and vice in order to complete his definition of moral perfection and human flourishing. He also illustrates very plainly why moral perfection is not easy and why it is so praiseworthy. The true virtuoso at being a good human being is indeed a very rare phenomenon, as his virtuosity requires great skill and knowledge and years of experience and practice.
Aristotle clearly does not expect that everyone hit the mean exactly all of the time, but that everyone at least aim toward it in order to become good. Always, Aristotle advises, we must aim toward what deserves to be praised in order to come close to hitting the mean (1109b24-27). Because of the complex particularity of the world, we must sometimes, however, deviate in the direction of excess and sometimes in the direction of deficiency in our intent to hit the mean (1109b25), but this is not to be blamed, as Aristotle explains:

\[
\text{άλλος ο μεν μικρόν τοῦ εἰ τορεκ θαίνων οὐ ψεύδεται, οὔτε ἐπὶ τὸ μᾶλλον οὔτε ἐπὶ τὸ ἤπτον, ὃ δὲ πλέον οὗτος γὰρ οὐ λανθάνει. ὃ δὲ μέχρι τίνος καὶ ἐπὶ πόσον ψευδέσθαι οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀλλο οὔδεν τῶν \( \xiασθήτων \) τὰ δὲ τοιαύτα ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἐκαστά, καὶ ἐν τῇ αἰσθήσει ἡ κρίσις.}
\]

We do not blame one who diverges a little from the right course whether on the side of too much or too little, but the one who diverges more widely, for his error is noticed. Yet to what degree and how seriously a man must err to be blamed is not easy to define on principle. For in fact no object of perception is easy to define; and such questions of degree depend on particular circumstances and the decision lies with perception. (1109b18-24)

Moral error, therefore, is, as is moral virtuosity, very dependent upon degree and circumstance.

In Aristotle’s discussion of the mean and human virtuosity the test for virtue and vice is, in the broadest sense, simply praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. Moral virtuosity is that which deserves to be praised, as it comes closest to hitting the mean, our standard reference of the best, while vice, any excessive deviation from the mean, is to be blamed. As with moral virtuosity, Aristotle also differentiates moral error based upon the quality of the feeling and action which arises out of a certain character or disposition of mind. Beginning in Book III Aristotle distinguishes between actions which are voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary actions are those which arise from within the moral agent and are thus in the agent’s power to do or not do, and as such they are capable of praise or blame.
Aristotle includes within this category actions due to passion and appetite since the initiative of the act lies within the moral agent, however irrational the emotions are. Conversely, involuntary, or unintentional, actions are distinguished in two ways: those acts done under compulsion where the action is thus initiated from a source external to the agent, or those actions done due to ignorance where the moral agent does not choose the act he performs with full knowledge of all particulars of the circumstance (III.1).

In his analysis of just and unjust acts in Book V Aristotle further differentiates varying degrees of moral blame in a description of three categories of kinds of harm, or error, that a person can commit in his dealings with his fellow human beings. These are: an unforeseen mishap or accident ($\alpha\tau\chi\eta\mu\alpha$); an act done in ignorance, but which could have been foreseen and avoided ($\alpha\mu\alpha\rho\tau\eta\mu\alpha$);^52 and a harmful act done knowingly, but not out of a calculated and deliberate malice ($\alpha\delta\iota\kappa\eta\mu\alpha$). Since Aristotle claims all such acts are done out of some degree of ignorance, responsibility or blame varies according as to how conscious the moral agent is of the harm he does. If, for example, the agent commits an act for which he has regret afterwards, the act itself is unjust and blameworthy, but the agent would not be considered essentially unjust. Aristotle, however, insists that harmful acts done from choice and with deliberate malice are unjust and wicked and the agent is fully culpable. Moral depravity ($\mu\omega\chi\theta\eta\rho\iota\alpha$) also clearly produces unjust, vicious, and immoral actions which are in no way excusable, although it too results from a certain state of ignorance (V.8).

Although Aristotle admits a range of moral error and corresponding blame which fluctuates variously between limits of true knowledge and absolute ignorance, he is unflinching in his assertion that the human being is responsible for his own
actions and character. It is the human being who chooses good and evil (III.5).
The human being is clearly the origin of actions which ultimately arise from within
the self; thus, for Aristotle there is no doubt that the human being possesses the
power to act or not act, so that even in ignorance or passion he can be responsible
for what he does. Aristotle defines choice as a voluntary act preceded by
deliberation (III.2-5). It is a reasoning process of thought which seeks to determine
a particular outcome in circumstances that are unpredictable and indeterminate.
Such deliberation therefore seeks to determine means to ends, the "how" of things in
ethical behavior, or, in other words, in what manner and by what means we get
from here to there. Aristotle notes, as he does with his doctrine of the mean, that
this crucial "how" is much more difficult to accomplish than knowing what to do
(V.9 1137a6ff). Choice itself is characterized by moral goodness or badness and it
determines a person's character even more than his actions (III.2 1111b30ff).
Choice, in fact, differentiates the morally weak (ἀκρατής), a person without moral
power who acts through appetite, not choice, from the morally strong (ἐγκρατής), a
person who possesses moral power and acts with self-control and from choice (III.2
1111b14-16). Aristotle spends the bulk of Book VII in his Nicomachean Ethics
defining the morally weak in all the varying degrees of blame and he seems to use
this concept of the morally weak as an example of the person who is not a
wrongdoer, but who nevertheless does wrong.

If the ideal is attainable for Aristotle, we must clarify how he characterizes the
ideal individual. It is not the φρόνιμος as one might expect. For the ideal moral
agent Aristotle uses the term σοφός which is translated literally as "the man who
is good in an earnest and serious sense." Thus the σοφός is the person who is
earnest about life, one who takes life seriously and the fact that he is a human being.
He is responsible about moral choice, with high moral standards to which he turns to help him judge correctly about what is truly good. Therefore, he knows where the mean lies, having developed virtuosity in making the most deeply right moral choice. This ideal moral agent has acquired the ability to discern the truth in almost every situation and is not misled by pleasure or by whatever merely seems good at the moment, differentiating him from the worthless (φαῦλος) person, as well as the morally weak, who are both corrupted in different degrees by the pursuit of the wrong kind of pleasure and mistaken ideas of what constitutes the moral good (III.4).

The στονδαίος, moreover, is also the model for the εὐδαιμων—the flourishing human being Aristotle describes in Book I, Chapter 10, of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. This supremely happy man possesses a permanent and stable happiness which is unaffected by changes of life's fortune because his life's activities are performed at the level of ἀρετή, or virtuosity, the most enduring and valuable activity on the scale of all human activity. Because he is truly good he will bear any adverse changes of fortune most beautifully and nobly, which is why his happiness is so continuous and stable. Aristotle admits that some measure of good luck and success can make a life more completely and perfectly happy, and that the pains and hindrances of many misfortunes can also seriously mar our happiness; yet, he insists that only very great and numerous disasters could disrupt this highest and most complete and perfected form of human happiness, for in the pain of any misfortune this supremely happy man's nobility will always shine through as he endures with patience, generosity, and greatness of soul. Aristotle implies that misfortune may, in fact, hone and temper such a man's goodness, allowing him the challenge--and opportunity--to practice his virtuosity in being a human being. The εὐδαιμων can
never become miserable because he cannot do what is hateful and base, the mark of vice and unhappiness, for in his expertise at being human, he can make the most effective use of whatever circumstances life presents to him, whether good or bad (1100a31-1101a14).

In Book X, Chapter 7, Aristotle outlines the most perfect, the most complete life for a human being, one which appears to go beyond the expectation of the doctrine of the mean. In accord with his usual "hierarchical" way of thinking, Aristotle proclaims that \( \theta\varepsilon\omega\rho\iota\alpha \), translated variously as "contemplation," "theoretical knowledge," "study," or "speculation," is the highest form of activity possible for the human species; therefore, a life of such activity constitutes the supreme, most complete happiness possible for the human being. Since the human mind (\( \nu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\varsigma \)) is the highest thing in the human being, Aristotle has determined that this is what differentiates the human being from other animals. Because the activity of the mind contemplates the eternal, unchanging principles of reality, those objects of the cosmos which are divine and the most beautiful of all things, this part of the human being is also in some sense divine. It follows that contemplation, the highest activity of the human mind, is the most divine, or god-like, activity the human being can perform; hence, it results in a life and happiness separate and even higher than that of the purely human life of moral virtuosity (1177a12ff).

Aristotle creates some confusion with this assertion because he has been implying up to this point that moral virtuosity is the highest life of the human being; now he states that it is secondary and inferior. This conclusion appears to result, in some way, from his initial division of the human soul in Book I into two parts, and a corresponding division of the human virtues into the moral and the intellectual. It seems reasonable to assume that the activities of these two parts of
the soul must work together in the truly flourishing human being, yet, unfortunately, Aristotle does not fully explain his thoughts about θεωρία.⁵³ The life of θεωρία, however, does fundamentally agree with Aristotle’s principle of the attainment of ἀρετή, or virtuosity. It makes sense that the human being must reach the absolute apex of human functioning in order to realize fully his innate potential and find absolute completion, and for Aristotle this is the divine in the human being. If one views a life of contemplation as the fulfillment of another aspect of the human being that is separate from the external, physically active life that directs itself toward the moral sphere of human life, some of the confusion can be avoided. θεωρία then becomes the flourishing and completion of the internal, more privately active life of the human soul. For Aristotle, this contemplative life represents the highest, most complete functioning of the human soul because it touches upon the divine, which is highest thing of all in the universe. However, there yet remains some confusion about θεωρία. Nevertheless, for our purposes it is significant that Aristotle connects ultimate human perfection with the divine. This connection to the divine in the cosmos gives Aristotle’s ethical theory further depth and completeness—a kind of numinosity in the art of being a human being that also brings even higher value in striving to become the best human being we can be.

As if in anticipation of the protest that the divine is unattainable for the human being, that one ought not expect such self-defeating perfection, Aristotle defends his position:

οὐ χρή δὲ κατὰ τοὺς παρανοοῦντας ἀνθρώπων ἐνθεύειν ἀνθρωπον ὡμνα οὐδὲ διηνύτα τὸν θείον, ἀλλ' ἐνθεύει τοὺς ἀθανατίζειν καὶ πάντα ποιεῖν πρὸς τὸ ζῆν κατὰ τὸ κράτιστον τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ· εἰ γὰρ καὶ τῷ ὀγκῷ μικρόν ἐστι, δυνάμει καὶ τιμιότητι πολὺ μᾶλλον πάντων ὑπερέχει.

Nor ought we to obey those who enjoin that a man should have man’s thoughts and a mortal the thoughts of mortality, but we ought so far as possible to live
in accordance with the highest thing in him; for though this be small in bulk, in power and value it far surpasses all the rest. (1177b32-1178a1)

Here, as with his doctrine of the mean, Aristotle’s emphasis is on the activity of striving and aiming toward an ideal standard. It is, therefore, the quality of the activity in human life which comes from the proper directing of one’s intentions toward appropriate goals which has the highest value and meaning for the individual human being and is most important to Aristotle’s understanding of human flourishing and completion. Again, the heroic spirit in striving toward the human good is what gives worth and quality to human life and the human being, more so, it seems, than actually reaching the goal. Only in the process of believing in and aspiring toward something which is of superlative value, which is greater and beyond oneself, can the human being acquire his essential life spirit, that which gives meaning, purpose and a deep intangible value to his very existence. When this reverence for something greater than himself, such as the divine, or the good, or a higher ideal of some kind, dies, something vital in the human being also dies; he and his life is impoverished, as a human being he is diminished, becoming less as there is nothing for which he can dream and hope for in order to be truly and most fully human.
Chapter 3

Aristotle and Tragedy

Although Aristotle views life as a struggle, a striving toward the goal of human completion—the good and the best in being a human being—he is confident that almost everyone, through his efforts, can attain a reasonable level of perfection and happiness. If Aristotle's optimistic view of human flourishing in a world directed toward the good and the best is therefore correct, and, as he believes, the happy, virtuous man can never be truly miserable, how can this Aristotelian optimism be reconciled with the pessimism of tragedy and the tragic world view. It is obvious from Aristotle's description of the εὐδοκίμων, the happy man, which includes one of the few oblique allusions to a tragic sense of life in the Nicomachean Ethics, that Aristotle does not believe a tragic reality can exist. Although Aristotle does admit misfortune and suffering in his view of human existence, he sees it as a deviation from the ideal of human nature and the order of the cosmos.

Tragedy, however, is commonly held to depict the downfall of the basically good person, who, in spite of an admirable moral goodness, or even because of it, suffers or dies in a particularly disturbing and thought-provoking way. Tragedy is disturbing because it may imply, contrary to Aristotle, that human virtuosity and goodness is not sufficient for human happiness and that, in fact, the structure of the universe is fundamentally opposed to human happiness and the highest moral aspirations of humankind. Consider, for example, Oedipus, an essentially good man and king, who unintentionally killed his own father and married his own mother, and who despite his goodness became a blind and wandering beggar, a
horrible pollution in his land. Another example from tragedy is Hecuba, the wife of Priam, the ruler of Troy, a good and noble woman, who, after losing all except two of her children in the Trojan War, saw her last daughter sacrificed by the Achaeans upon Achilleus' grave and then discovered her youngest son had been killed by one of her best friends. She responds to this misfortune by losing her humanity in a bestial revenge. These tragic stories of extreme suffering naturally cause one to ask for an explanation for such incomprehensible circumstances; such extreme misery and misfortune does not seem fair or right, and the moral confusion and discomfort persists when there are no answers, no clear reason for such disaster.

Tragedy therefore appears to teeter on the edge of absolute hopelessness and despair in its suggestion that there is no purpose, meaning, or order in the world. Its characters portray people who are inept at controlling their lives and happiness; they live in a world governed by a seemingly pernicious and unpredictable fate, who are swept away by irrational passions and so overwhelmed by such a blind ignorance about themselves and this "fate-full" world that they are doomed to make tragic mistakes, causing great misfortune and unhappiness for themselves and others. In such a world one questions, in direct contrast to Aristotle, the value of being moral or aspiring toward human virtuosity, since it all seems for nought, human life having no real purpose and happiness being so elusive and unstable.

In her essay "The Death of Tragedy," Susan Sontag states that tragedy is a vision of heroic nihilism. She quotes Simon Weil's description of the Iliad as a perfect example of the tragic vision: "The Iliad is about the emptiness and arbitrariness of the world, the ultimate meaninglessness of all moral values and the terrifying rule of death and inhuman force." Tragedy, Sontag asserts, thus demonstrates, the "implacability of the world," "its brute opaqueness" in the "collision of subjective intention with objective fate." She suggests that the
assertions of Judaism and Christianity that all events in the world are part of a divine plan, that every disaster must be seen somehow as just and good, denies tragic values which say there is indeed ultimate injustice and undeserved suffering in the world. These religious traditions's attempt to find order and meaning in the world, in fact, prevented a rebirth of tragedy in the Christian era; for modern tragedy, Sontag claims, is often not true tragedy at all. This is apparently because, according to Sontag, modern man lives with the "increasing burden of subjectivity at the expense of his sense of the reality of the world."57 Modern theater depicts life as a dream and the world as a stage in which characters self-consciously dramatize themselves in their public roles, roles which have become separated from their private and more true selves. In contrast, the ancient Greeks did not have this same self-consciousness and degree of subjectivity; consequently, they did not act out a role, but instead saw themselves as being the actual role they portrayed.58 The ancient Greeks, therefore, incorporated in their drama a larger concern and a greater interaction with an objective reality outside the independent self; their dramas reflect just how much they felt themselves to be directly connected with and influenced by the world at large. This broader perspective would significantly change the nature of the tragic vision, as we shall see below.

This view of tragedy as totally nihilistic, pessimistic, and irrational is a very grim world view, indeed. It is, however, a very modern interpretation of the essence of tragedy, and Sontag's essay does, indeed, imply that the true tragic sense of life belongs to the classical drama of the ancient Greeks, the creators of tragedy. She grants that this ancient view may be quite different from the modern perspective. In fact, the phrase "the tragic view of life" did not exist in ancient times. Aristotle does speak of different opinions about what constitutes a life of happiness in his discussion of ethics, and such opinions, which express different
views of life, in his writings as well as those of other Greek philosophers and writers do, therefore, clearly suggest personal and cultural views of life. Nevertheless, "the tragic view of life" is our own modern terminology for a modern philosophic concept, which often does not belong to the ancient Greeks at all.

The concept of the tragic view of life arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among certain German philosophers, scholars, and Romantics, such as Lessing, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Winckelmann, Hölderlin and Nietzsche, who were enamored with ancient Greek art and culture, and, especially, classical Greek ideals. These German theorists sought to link German thought with the world of the ancient Greeks, believing that the classical ideals were far superior to those of German culture at that time. They therefore desired to model the German nation on the ideals of excellence and beauty which they felt epitomized ancient Greece. As a consequence of this intense focus on and enthusiasm for all aspects of ancient Greek culture, theories about the nature of Greek tragedy and the tragic proliferated.\textsuperscript{59}

The German interpretations of tragedy were largely philosophical speculations of a metaphysical nature and this philosophical tradition then combined with a tradition of literary theory and criticism emphasizing dramatic style and effect, which had also been accumulating since the Renaissance and the rediscovery of Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics}.\textsuperscript{60} Needless to say, this philosophical and literary theorizing upon tragedy and the tragic dimension has continued to the present day; thus, as with moral philosophy, conceptions of the tragic and what tragedy means are overlaid and confounded by centuries of various literary and philosophical traditions and views. It is, therefore, also necessary to go back to Aristotle, the first critic of tragedy, and, ultimately, to the poetics of the ancient Greeks’ own tragedies, in order to clarify the tragic sense of life and its relationship to moral perfection and virtue ethics.
According to the classical scholar Albin Lesky, Greek tragedy of the fifth century gave both the original and the perfect expression of the tragic sense of life. Many have tried through the centuries since the ancient Greeks to define tragedy, but the complex nature of tragedy makes any precise definition a perplexing problem. The tragic motif begins in the heroic songs of the Homeric hero, whose anguish in the face of his human limitations and inevitable death is highlighted in the dramatic contrast with the blessedness of the immortal gods. The human being as human being was depicted as extremely vulnerable to failure in a world of unseen, unknowable, and overpowering forces where appearances hide actual reality. Later Athenian tragedy adapted these heroic tales to a dramatic performance given as part of a public festival in honor of the god Dionysius. Most of these dramas chose from the heroic cycles serious subjects which involved suffering, and, therefore, the tragic experience became deeply associated with the experience of human sorrow and often depicted "a fall from an illusory world of security and happiness into a depth of inescapable anguish." Yet, tragedy is not simply the depiction of a sad event; it is, according to Lesky, a particular dynamic sequence of events which appear to have a special depth of meaning in which suffering becomes important to the ultimate meaning of human existence. Because the suffering is so bitter and hard, it is also an important path to self-knowledge for the human being.

Lesky differentiates the essence of tragedy into three forms, a differentiation that he believes helps to clarify the problems arising from the variety of tragic experiences he has discovered in his study of ancient Greek tragedy and theories about tragedy through the centuries. The "totally tragic world view" conceives of the world as a place where forces and values are inexplicably and inevitably predestined to conflict and be destroyed. There is, moreover, no transcendent purpose in this conflict and destruction. The "totally tragic conflict" is also
inescapable, but the destruction is a part of a transcendent totality with laws which have meaning and purpose, implying that if the human being can come to know this higher level of being, the conflict can be resolved and have meaning. It also does not, however, include the whole world in conflict and destruction, but remains as one situation of conflict within the world. Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is given as an example of this category. Finally, the "tragic situation" views a conflict of opposing forces and anguished awareness of inescapable destruction, yet there is still hope of relief from the suffering and anguish. The possibility exists that a harmonious resolution can be achieved. The *Oresteia* by Aeschylus is considered to be by Lesky just this sort of tragic situation. Tragedy is, therefore, as Lesky describes it, not simply a dramatic art form, for it clearly expresses a particular view of the world. Lesky consequently reviews the philosophical debate of recent times that has arisen surrounding questions of whether tragedy presupposes a meaningless world, a void of nihilism in the totally tragic world view, or a world governed by a higher transcendent order of purpose and meaning. The one view resigns humanity to defeat and annihilation while the other raises the human being up into the possibility of hope and the belief in the existence of absolute, unchanging norms and values beyond events in everyday human life.66

Lesky is compelled to answer this debate through a study of ancient Greek tragedy. He demonstrates that none of the three ancient Greek tragedians whose works remain for us today subscribe to the totally tragic world view, where the universal order makes human suffering inevitable and utterly senseless, such as Susan Sontag describes in her essay. In Aeschylus we see the gods representing the meaning of the world. Suffering is the path to self-knowledge and knowledge of the gods and their universal wisdom. In Sophocles' plays this deep faith in the gods and a transcendent purpose continues. Although his characters are shown in
irreconcilable conflicts with unseen forces which rule world events and the divine remains an unknowable mystery, the human being asserts himself heroically with dignity and worth, directly confronting the forces of the universe and taking responsibility for his actions in the world. Euripides appears to come closest to accepting the totally tragic world view. Under the influence of the Sophists, Euripides used his dramas for a deep and searching philosophical questioning of the human being and his actions. His tragic world is full of irreconcilable contradictions which are centered around the individual and the human world rather than the conflict between the human and the divine. Although Euripides questioned the pious acceptance of the popular religious tradition and often harshly criticized the immorality of the traditional gods, along with the folly and cruelty of humankind, there is, however, enough evidence among his criticisms to show that he believed humanity and the world to be more good than bad, and that a transcendent order ultimately prevailed.

Euripides' plays represent the transition between tragedy and modern drama; hence, his plays can perhaps most clearly illustrate what is true tragedy and what is not. Euripidean tragedies often exhibit ambiguity and inconsistency; it is therefore extremely difficult to define a coherent, unified world view from his plays. Because of his focus on the contradictory nature of things, a focus on contradiction that was so typical of the Sophistic movement of his times, the thought within Euripides' plays and their structure are often similarly contradictory. Euripidean drama, for example, will contain the new thinking of Sophistic rational debate within a structure still formulated upon the traditional literary form. As Euripides therefore begins to give new meanings and contexts to the old myths, we also see an increasing secularization in his plays. Gods and goddesses still walk upon his stage, but their behavior is often less dignified and "god-like," often functioning without
meaningful relevance or much religious connotation; for Euripides' emphasis is increasingly centered upon the human being and the dynamics of human complex psychological subtleties, passions, and motivations. The questioning of philosophical theory is gradually replacing religious reverence in his plays; internal human experience and transformation thus also tend to displace external events and human activity, while Euripides' characters are more often portrayed against the background of chance and changeable fate rather than transcendent divinity and cosmic order.

The questioning of Euripides' thought and his structural innovations often stretch the boundaries of his tradition, yet his plays and art still remain within the spirit and definition of tragedy. Lesky insists that Euripides was never an atheist, or nihilistic. Several passages in his tragedies indicate a belief in the existence of higher powers which fashion human destiny, a divinity which is however beyond religious superstition, such as in his tragedy *The Suppliants*, where the chorus sings in praise of the gods these words:

I believe
That there are more good things than bad for mortals;
If there were not, the light would not be ours.
I praise the god who set our life in order,
Lifting it out of savagery and confusion.67

and in *The Trojan Women*, when Hecuba prays the following:

O power, who mount the world, wheel where the world rides,
O mystery of man's knowledge, whosoever you be,
Zeus named, nature's necessity or mortal mind,
I call upon you; for you walk the path none hears
yet bring all human action back to right at last.68

Euripides, therefore, never appears to deny the existence of divine power, his concept of the gods is simply not that of the popular tradition. His questioning doubts the value of this tradition, but it functions primarily as Euripides' own
passionate search for the truth behind human nature, a search which never ends for him and which he never successfully concludes. It is this profound questioning of the human being and his complex contradictory nature that could often give great depth to his poetry, as well as a tremendous power and pathos. A character such as Medea can display the most abominable and inhuman cruelties, while others, such as Alcestis, Hercules, or Iphigeneia will exhibit courageous self-sacrifice and great human merit. Euripides' last play, *The Bacchae*, returns to the more archaic tragic form and subject matter and is a much more typical tragedy than any of his previous plays. Its dramatic action depicts a tension between "the highest rapture and the deepest anguish" of the forces of life, and thus, demonstrates a tragic conflict of the highest order.69

Even in Euripides, the most cynical of the tragedians, there is, therefore, no vision of utter meaninglessness in the world. Human suffering is still framed within a definite world order,70 albeit one in which the "human" order is severely questioned. Euripidean tragedy does not yet, however, promote a completely hopeless world view. The world for classical tragedy and tragedian was therefore, Lesky concludes, one of meaningful absolutes where order and purpose existed in a universe which is fundamentally divine. He states that the totally tragic world view rejects the idea of the Absolute--of a meaningful universe that is divine in origin. Classical tragedy, on the contrary, presupposes such an order, and its tragic events confirm it. But as the relationship with the transcendent begins to weaken, the conviction and the dignity of tragedy decline.71

It is significant to Lesky that the disappearance of true tragedy after Euripides coincides with a loss of faith in the old gods and a loss of religious depth generally in the Greek society.72 Tragedy after Euripides therefore becomes "modern," and never again quite like ancient Greek tragedy.
Lesky's study shows that the essence of the ancient form of tragedy is not nihilistic and is instead grounded in the belief that there is order and purpose and meaning in the world, a much more positive and hopeful vision of life than human suffering implies. This suggests as well an affinity to Aristotle's view of human nature and life. Aristotle's optimistic view of the world and the human being is similarly compatible with the tragic world view in Greek tragedy; it is not necessary to split fundamental reality into two, the Aristotelian and the tragic. In view of Aristotle's ethical theory, however, tragedy exemplifies human moral imperfection. The characters of tragedy are models of how the human being can deviate from the mean of moral conduct, failing to flourish as a human being because they do not attend to a proper aim at the ultimate human good. The moral imperfection depicted in tragedy is why Plato strongly disapproved of poetry. Because of its immorality, Plato believed that tragic poetry had a corrupting influence on the human being; therefore, in the Republic he banned it from his ideal city. In Plato's thinking tragic poetry nurtured the emotional excesses in the human being, causing him to lose control of himself and his reason. He thought that tragedy would encourage the citizens of his city to think that they were not responsible for their own fates. As fictional accounts of events that had never happened, tragedy thus told untrue stories; hence, from a strictly philosophical perspective as well, they were inferior imitations of the true nature of reality.

If Aristotle had rejected the tragic, as did Plato, we should see this evidenced in his writings, particularly the Poetics, his treatise on tragedy. We shall, therefore, turn to a discussion of this particular treatise in order to see just how Aristotle viewed moral perfection in tragedy.

Aristotle's Poetics has been criticized because it does not interpret or evaluate
the meaning of tragedy. Aristotle, rather, discusses how to construct a plot that will produce the maximum and best combination of pity and fear, the essential tragic emotions. These emotions for Aristotle define the best kind of tragedy and evoke the pleasure that is unique to tragedy. At one point in his treatise, Aristotle defines tragedy as an imitation not of men, but of an action and of life (1450a16).

Character is, furthermore, not primary, but secondary to the action because it is by one’s actions that a person is happy or unhappy, succeeds or fails, in life (1150a18). Aristotle also states, however, that character is what reveals moral purpose or will, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids (1450b8-9). Aristotle notes further that tragedy’s characters must be either good (σωφροσύνη), or unworthy (φαῦλος), since character is distinguished by virtuosity (ἀρετή) and vice (κακία), that is, they are better or worse, or much as we, the majority of humanity, are, lying somewhere in between (1148a1-5). Choice, therefore, determines the goodness and badness of the character. In these passages are definite echoes of Aristotle’s ethical theory in his Nicomachean Ethics. He makes it quite clear that tragedy is also about making right choices which will lead to happiness or unhappiness in life.

Tragedy is then an important showcase for moral activity since it demonstrates so profoundly how difficult moral choice is, how disastrous its consequences can be, and its overall value for human life and human worth. In short, it dramatically portrays just how hard it is to become the best human being one can be and especially how difficult it is to hit the middle way. At times, tragedy can even show how good choices can respond most beautifully when purely external misfortune falls upon a human being.

Aristotle’s Poetics has become the standard for the definition of tragic literature; yet it is also an extremely controversial document. Through the centuries
since Aristotle wrote his treatise scholars have made many attempts to interpret and
reinterpret Aristotle's ideas on tragedy. His work has had a tremendous influence
on tragic theory and literary criticism, although a great deal of this influence is
based upon serious misinterpretations of his text. It is not my purpose to enter into
the debate about what constitutes true tragedy in this thesis; however, what tragedy
appears to be in moral terms and how this relates to moral perfection is quite
relevant to my argument. Therefore, I shall attempt to examine roughly, relying
upon the best scholarly opinions I can find, a few of the concepts in Aristotle's
theory about tragedy that have a particular bearing on his idea of moral perfection.
I do, therefore, very much agree with the assessment of those modern scholars who
argue that Aristotle's *Poetics* is "morally laden" and not purely aesthetic, that it must
be understood in light of the moral assumptions that underlie the ethical theory in his
other philosophical works.73

Aristotle formally defines tragedy in Chapter 6 of his treatise in the following
way:

> ἐστιν δὲν τραγῳδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος
> ἐχούσης, ἣδεσμένω λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων
> καὶ ὁ δὲ ἀπαγγελόντας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαινοῦσα τὴν τῶν τοιοῦτων
> παθημάτων κάθαραν.

Tragedy, then, is the imitation of a *good* action, which is complete, and of a
certain length, by means of language made pleasing for each part separately; it
relies in its various elements, not on narrative but on acting; through *pity* and
*fear* it achieves the *purification* (catharsis) of these emotions. (1449b24-28)74

The terms that have been highlighted are among those which have moral implication
and significance. These are σπουδαίος, ἔλεος, φόβος, and κάθαρος. Other
"morally laden" terms from elsewhere in Aristotle's text which will also be
discussed below are ἀμαρτία and τὸ φιλάνθρωπον.

It is generally agreed that σπουδαίος is, as with many other ancient Greek
words, difficult to translate adequately into English. No one word satisfactorily captures its wide range of meanings. Several translators prefer "serious" to "good" as a translation because Aristotle at the point of his definition has been discussing the differences between comedy and tragedy and serious action would contrast more properly with non-serious comic action. Rorty believes that serious is an appropriate term because the kinds of actions depicted in tragedy are those that are vitally important to a human life. These sorts of actions are crucial in defining one's life since tragedy shows the way such actions affect one's ends, and how error in performing them brings disaster. Kaufmann and Golden both prefer "noble" as the most accurate translation; therefore, their sense of tragic action tends to lean toward the heroic. This is because σπουδαῖος is at other points in the treatise opposed to φαῦλος, which means "common," "mean," "worthless," and "ignoble." Σπουδαῖος, therefore, would have the opposite meanings of "of high worth," "worthwhile," "good," and "noble." Golden points out that Aristotle has defined σπουδαῖος in his Categories to be an adjectival form of ἀρετή, which would then connect σπουδαῖος with good in the sense of moral excellence or virtuosity. Golden also notes that Aristotle uses σπουδαῖος consistently throughout the Poetics in reference to character; therefore, he argues that Aristotle differentiates tragic action from that of comedy on the basis of the kind of character imitated. Tragedy depicts the actions of the σπουδαῖοι, while comedy the actions of the φαῦλοι. Since the quality of a person's character intrinsically determines the quality of his actions, Golden amends the interpretation of Aristotle's definition to read "tragedy is the imitation of an action that reveals nobility of character." This interpretation, admittedly, has a certain valid connection with the thought in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics.
John Jones, however, is also correct when he writes that the separation of the meaning of σπουδαίος into various English translations is a result of "modern" misinterpretations of Aristotle's usage and a misunderstanding of the term "good," for as Jones says:

Aristotle has in mind a generalised, aristocratic, ancient and practical ideal of human excellence, so broad that the latter-day doubleness of spoudaios disappears within it....and the inner identity of seriousness in the action with heroic worth in the stage-figure who proves true to the noble type is still so obvious that he can leave his reader to recognise it for himself.80

Tragic action is therefore all of the above, that is, a presentation in some way of the serious, the good, and the noble in human action. It seems clear that Aristotle intended this word to convey an ethical requirement for tragic action in his definition.

At this point it must be stressed that action dominates in Aristotle's theory of tragedy. This is quite important to keep in mind, for as John Jones in his study of Aristotle and tragedy cautions, the modern reader must not make Greek tragedy into an imitation of human beings, overly psychologizing Greek tragedy and Aristotle's Poetics, otherwise he turns them into versions of modern art, distorting their meaning and value. Our modern conception of dramatic character and the human self, Jones says, is centripetal, one of intense inwardness and subjectivity, of a solitary, individualized consciousness. Aristotle, on the other hand, with his emphasis upon action makes the figure on the stage, as well as the human being, at one with his action, which means the self becomes centrifugal, moving outward into the activity of the dramatic action and of life, "a continuous dying into the full life of self through the self's dissipation in action."81 The people of tragedy are universalized, Jones remarks, they are the people of life. The stage-figure is, furthermore, a realized type, that is, it conforms to what is required of the type
portrayed—king, slave, woman—in appropriateness and goodness. Jones notes that this sense of goodness is the achievement of the fullest articulation of the particular type, the Aristotelian achievement of the good of the type, or its τελος. The good of the type is also the fulfillment of the Greek mean, a concept which is prevalent in Aristotle's thought. Jones further explains that the stage-figure is both good in its achievement of excellence as to its type and yet typical, a unity of the normal and the ideal within an individual who represents a class of individuals. Oedipus as king is therefore merged with Oedipus the human being. Jones' warning recalls Susan Sontag's essay and her comment that modern man is over-burdened by his subjectivity; he is out of balance with the reality of the world, while the ancient Greeks, who were less subjectively "bound," tended to identify fully with their roles in life and in the theater. Here, in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the reality of the world is one of dynamic activity and perfection of form and function, the human being is fully interactive with his world, the structure of his life dependent upon this activity.

The structure of the tragic action, the plot, is "the soul of tragedy" (1450a15), and it is the plot which Aristotle repeatedly states is foremost, the "first and most important thing in Tragedy" (1450b22). He describes the plot as the structural union of the parts (1451a30), with its own principles of development and completion. Plot therefore becomes for Aristotle a kind of living organism (1459a21), demonstrating once again Aristotle's penchant for the biological. The principles of tragedy Aristotle outlines in his treatise are intended to describe how tragedy can reach its perfection and the completion of the form it inherently is. If perfection is recognized as Aristotle's fundamental moral principle, plot is also a moral element in Aristotle's theory, since it, too, is teleologically directed toward an end: "The incidents and the plot are the end of tragedy: and the end is the chief
thing of all" (1450a16ff). This defines the plot's moral nature as it associates tragic action with a teleological directive to aim at some good and the thought which begins Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: Achievement of an end is the attainment of the good—completion or perfection in the good at which all things aim. Aristotle, therefore, must emphasize actions in tragedy because it is primarily by human action in the completed form of the structure of a human life, instead of simply by character, that happiness, the ultimate human good, is realized. Plot as the *telos* of tragedy is a continuation of this line of thought. It gives tragedy a definite moral nature. Plot is responsible for imitating actions that lead to and constitute happiness or unhappiness; it functions as a means to reveal human virtuosity by showing how human action produces that happiness, or unhappiness, as is more often the case in tragedy. By revealing just how human folly may undermine human flourishing, tragedy becomes a measure of the degree to which action or life is conducted on the level of virtuosity.83

Plot is therefore a complex moral phenomenon, reflecting the complexity of human action, emotion, character, and life in general. Through his poetic skill the tragic poet constructs the proper tragic plot that will evoke the emotions that define the proper response to tragic action, emotions that also have a complicated nature. Scholars point to passages in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to define what he means exactly by the pity and fear evoked by tragedy. In Book II of the *Rhetoric* Aristotle defines ἔλεος ("pity," "compassion") as "a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it; an evil that one might expect to come upon himself or one of his friends, and when it seems near (8:85b)." He defines φόβος ("fear") in the same work thus: "for men do not fear all evils...but only such as involve great pain or destruction, and only if they appear to be not far
off but near at hand and threatening (5:82a);" later he adds, "fear is accompanied by the expectation that we are going to suffer some fatal misfortune (5:82b)." To support the claim that these two emotions are closely connected, we can quote another passage of the *Rhetoric*: "We have to remember the general principle that what we fear for ourselves excites our pity when it happens to others (8:86a)."84 Pity therefore implies that we feel sympathy and compassion for someone who is suffering. We identify with the person's sorrow, share it in some degree; although it is not our own, we recognize and fear that it could be. Fear indicates the threat of danger is near, that something might happen soon to cause great pain in suffering and misfortune, something that should be avoided at all costs.

Kaufmann suggests that these two English terms are weak translations of the ancient Greek when one considers what happens when experiencing a Greek tragedy, an experience of intense suffering and overwhelming terror. Instead of pity and fear, he thus prefers "ruth," an archaic English word with a meaning which is the opposite of ruthless, and "terror," a stronger form of fear that is implied by the origins of the word φόβος, which meant panic flight in the Homeric epics. Kaufmann admits that Aristotle's meaning probably lies somewhere in between his own alternatives and the more usual translations of "pity" and "fear." Once again we see the difficulty and the distortion in meaning when one language and one culture is translated into another and across centuries of time. It is crucial to the understanding of tragedy, however, to get an appropriate sense of these emotions because Aristotle considers them definitive for the quality of true tragic action.85 Since these emotions are effects of the plot, they are also emotions deeply involved in the moral nature of tragedy, as we shall see below.

Aristotle does not explain why tragedy should evoke these particular two
emotions. He only observes that it does and that the best tragedy does it very well; furthermore, he believes that not only should a properly written tragedy evoke pity and fear, but that through this emotional response, if the tragedy is well-structured, a κάθαρσις occurs of these same emotions. The modern scholar is, unfortunately, left to wonder what Aristotle means by κάθαρσις. If κάθαρσις is the final achievement of a piece of tragic literature, as Aristotle's definition implies--some in fact call κάθαρσις the actual function of tragedy--it must be tied up with the chief end of tragedy, which Aristotle has already stated is the plot. With this connection to the ultimate end of tragedy, κάθαρσις also attains a definite moral status since the structure of the events in a work of tragedy are an imitation of human life, which for Aristotle means a life that ought to strive toward εὐδαιμονία, thus toward moral perfection.

Κάθαρσις is another very controversial term in Aristotle's Poetics and has been variously interpreted by many scholars. Amélie Rorty summarizes the different ideas combined in this term in three different interpretations: a medical therapeutic cleansing or purgation; a formal ritualized purification of powerful and dangerous emotions; an intellectual clarification which directs emotions to their properly intended objects. All three forms, Rorty says, are meant by Aristotle and are necessary for the "proper functioning of a well-balanced soul," that is, a soul brought to its proper order, functioning healthily, with neither an excess nor deficiency of emotions, with thought and emotion fulfilled in right measure, defined and directed toward the right things. She believes that the debate over whether κάθαρσις is an intellectual clarification or an emotional rectification is unnecessary, since for Aristotle, thought, character, and action are coordinate in human practical life. She justifies her view with the fact that, as we saw in his Nicomachean Ethics,
Aristotle had insisted that moral virtuosity of character cannot be attained without practical wisdom. Rorty herself describes κάθαρσις as a working through the emotions, which allows a person to realize "the proper objects of otherwise diffuse and sometimes misdirected passions;" hence, she concludes:

In recognizing and re-cognizing the real directions of their attitudes, the members of an audience are able to feel them appropriately; and by experiencing them in their clarified and purified forms, in a ritually defined and bounded setting, they are able to experience, however briefly, the kind of psychological functioning, the balance and harmony that self-knowledge can bring to action.\(^87\)

Closely associated with the concept of catharsis is the idea of tragic pleasure, another mysterious and unexplained concept in the Poetics. It seems morbid to claim that tragic poetry is pleasurable; it is paradoxical that the poet should strive to produce pleasure in his tragedies. How can observing the pain of human misery and failure be pleasing in any way? Aristotle, however, does make just that claim and recommendation for the rules of a perfect tragedy. He says in Poetics, Chapter 14:

\begin{quote}
où γὰρ πᾶσαν δεῖ ξητεῖν ἡδονὴν ἀπὸ τραυμώδειας ἄλλα τὴν οἰκείαν. ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν ἀπὸ ἐλέον καὶ φόβου διὰ μαμήσως δεῖ ἡδονὴν παρασκευάζειν τῶν ποιητῆν, φανερὸν ὡς τούτο ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐμποιητέον.
\end{quote}

...for we must not demand from tragedy every kind of pleasure, but the one which is proper (belongs) to it as its own. And since the poet must provide that pleasure which comes from pity and fear through the imitation, it is evident that this (particular pleasure) must be created within the circumstances (of the plot). (1453b11-14)\(^88\)

There is then a very specific and unique pleasure that tragedy produces, and it comes from pity and fear. From this passage many assume that Aristotle is speaking of κάθαρσις as a pleasurable release; however, from his discussion of pleasure in the Nicomachean Ethics, it is likely that Aristotle means tragic pleasure to be much more than that.
Aristotle defines pleasure in Book VII of his *Nicomachean Ethics* as the unimpeded activity of our natural state (1153a14-15). Every activity naturally exercised is accompanied by a pleasure proper to it. This pleasure is independent of any kind of achievement that might result from the activity and it is separate from the state that produces it. It is, therefore, a quality entirely intrinsic to the activity, as it fulfills, completes and perfects the action appropriate to what the activity is. Pleasure perfects the activity differently than the perfection that the goodness of the activity brings however. Aristotle states that the perfection of pleasure does not perfect as a fixed disposition (e.g. a virtue) does, but by being a supervening (ἐπιγνώμενον) perfection, like the bloom of health in the young and vigorous (1174b23ff). Hence pleasure accompanies and augments human activity when it is done as it should be, unimpeded by its imperfection, any incompletion of form or function.89

Pleasures are very distinct from one another, differing according to the activity that produces them. Some pleasures are therefore better than others. Recall Aristotle’s cautions that the wrong kind of pleasures corrupt the human being and that it is easy for the human being to get lost in the pursuit of the kind of pleasures which belong to cows rather than human beings. We can therefore choose pleasures which are more worthy of us and are more conducive to our human virtuosity. Pleasure, however, is not the ultimate end of human life. We choose our acts for their own sakes, for our ultimate human good, and not the pleasures that they bring. Aristotle emphasizes this point by remarking how the courageous person will choose to act well even if he must sacrifice his own life, forfeiting all goods and pleasures of life for the sake of acting good and nobly, rather than basely (1117b10ff).90 The ultimate value in being a human being for Aristotle therefore
remains firmly in our human virtuosity; nevertheless, pleasure is a value of high
worth in its own right, as he says: "there is no pleasure without activity and no
perfect activity without its pleasure (1175a21)."

As with human activity and life, tragic action in the plot also must attain to its
own peculiar pleasure in its ultimate perfection. In his *Poetics* Aristotle alludes to
two aspects of the pleasure in tragedy: there is the pleasure derived from a tragedy
when all its parts are well-formed and well-performed, a pleasure in the unity and
order of each incident, and there is the pleasure the human being derives from
imitation, a kind of delight in the recognition of the imitation’s likeness to reality
and in the learning through the imitation. But Aristotle does not answer the
question what is learned through the tragic imitation of human activity and life. If
the learning is simply a recognition of what is essentially human in human life,
Aristotle implies that our essential humanity, as it is reflected in tragic action, does
involve definite moral implications and responsibilities, and that the pleasure tragedy
gives also involves the moral life in some way as well.91 This question will be
discussed more fully below.

In order to explore the moral implications of the controversial terms in
Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, it is necessary to turn to Aristotle’s thoughts on the
character of the ideal tragic protagonist, since character is a pivotal moral element in
both Aristotle’s virtue ethics and his *Poetics*, and it is by the reversal of the
protagonist’s fortunes through his actions and character that the correct proportion of
pity and fear is aroused in tragedy. In *Poetics*, Chapter 13, Aristotle outlines his
criteria for the tragic protagonist. It turns out that the ideal tragic protagonist must
be a person who occupies the mean position between perfect goodness and absolute
vice or moral depravity. He is not especially distinguished in human virtuosity
(ἀφετή) and justice, and he falls into misfortune through no vice or depravity, but rather through a "certain hamartia (ἁμαρτία)"—some fatal error in conduct, or judgment, or a human frailty for which he is not fully responsible. Aristotle also required that the protagonist have great renown and good fortune so that his high personal status would make him more admirable and his fall into misfortune far more dramatic. Thus, the tragic protagonist is a person who is more good than bad, highly admirable in many respects, but not perfect, not faultless. Although he may be someone of high social status, he is in his humanity a person like ourselves (ἕμοιον), one with whom we can identify and whom we can understand, therefore, feeling fear for his fault and misfortune, knowing that his suffering could easily be our own. Because his ἁμαρτία is largely unintentional, not done with forethought or malice, and his error is one in which he is not completely blameworthy, we can also feel pity for an undeserved or unjustified suffering. Intellectual judgment is therefore combined with emotions of pity and fear in the proper response to a tragic performance. The spectator must evaluate emotionally and ethically the protagonist’s moral choices and his moral character to obtain the proper tragic pleasure and to experience the true tragic sense of life as intended by the tragic poet.92

Exactly what Aristotle means by a "certain hamartia" is another hotly debated concept, similar to the κάθως controversy. Is it a moral flaw of character, or a simple intellectual mistake of fact due to ignorance? In view of his account of moral error in his Nicomachean Ethics, it is most likely and more typically Aristotelian that ἁμαρτία denotes a range of meanings and applications that include varying degrees of moral blame as well as simple intellectual error. What is important is that the agent’s culpability is mitigated by circumstances in such a way
that the tragic emotions of pity and fear can be produced.93 Ἀμαρτία is fundamentally the deviation in some degree from the mean in aretaic human conduct. It thus mars the moral perfection of Aristotle's universe. Because Aristotle sees the natural order as always functioning in the best possible way, to be in attunement with that order will also represent the best. For moral perfection to be attained in harmony with nature, moral goodness must be acquired through one's own effort--study, practice, and the experience of years. This is nature's own best way of attaining perfection and, therefore, to participate in what is most sublime and blessed in the universe, this way must also be the human being's. Aristotle thus asserts that nature does not depend upon chance (τύχη) to attain perfection.

However, he does understand full well that factors exist in human life that will make human happiness much more difficult, or even impossible, to obtain. For example, the addition of some degree of external prosperity in the form of such things as friends, wealth, political power, good birth, good children, and personal beauty will augment the ability to perform virtuous acts and be happy. Aristotle admits such external attributes do require a kind of good luck. In such situations as these, where the individual cannot control external factors that contribute to his happiness, the universe is imperfect. Aristotle nevertheless firmly maintains that it is better to be happy through the greater and more divine prize of goodness--one's own efforts--as this is in more perfect accord with nature's own best way (ΝΕ I.8-9 1099a30-1099b24).

Because of Aristotle's firm belief in a natural order that is arranged toward attaining what is best, ἀμαρτία, as a deviation from that best, becomes very important to Aristotle, for it demonstrates how the human being, in spite of what he believes are his best efforts, deviates from the proper path to his perfection, and
ultimate happiness. The part ἀμαρτία plays in human happiness is also somewhat ambiguous, since it represents a kind of human error that seems both within and without human control—a mistake due to ignorance of circumstances, but which could have been foreseen and avoided. This raises the question of the extent to which the human being can actually control his ignorance. The moral element of tragedy is, therefore, a dominant theme in the Poetics, as Aristotle outlines the kinds of plot and character which would fail to arouse the proper tragic emotions and pleasure (1452b30ff). Thus tragedy should not depict morally good or worthy (ἔπιεικεῖς) men passing from good fortune to bad, for this is shocking (μικρόν), morally repugnant, and outrageous; nor should the wicked or the morally depraved (μοχθηροί) be seen passing from bad fortune to good as this is not only not pitiable or fearful, but it does not satisfy feelings of "philanthropy" (τὸ φιλάνθρωπον), a term signifying human feelings of sympathy and a kind of moral sense of propriety for good fortune which is clearly deserved. It is likewise particularly untragic to show a bad man passing from good fortune to bad because this reversal and suffering is not undeserved. In all possible plots Aristotle notes the type of moral response the character and his actions arouse, describing them in terms of moral repugnance and outrage or moral satisfaction and propriety.

In the strictest sense, the arousal of pity and fear is an aesthetic requirement for the construction of a good tragedy. The concept of τὸ φιλάνθρωπον, however, gives this feature of Aristotle's theory much of its moral significance. It appears obvious that Aristotle's discussion of the various schemes of tragic action that will properly arouse the essential tragic emotions of pity and fear is intended to show how the satisfaction or lack of satisfaction of the audience's moral sensibilities must be considered by the tragic poet if he is to arouse successfully these emotions. If
the tragic action is morally outrageous, neither pity nor fear will be evoked in the audience, the tragedy will not have its tragic effect—it will not be a real tragedy. This does not mean, however, that tragedy must evoke feelings of moral satisfaction to be truly tragic; on the contrary, Aristotle only states that a tragedy must not depict a situation which is not satisfactory to moral propriety (οὐ φιλάνθρωπον).

The requirements of tragedy are much more subtle and complex than to be fulfilled by one simple rule.

By exact definition, φιλάνθρωπον basically means "love," or "regard for" (φιλεῖν) the human being (ἀνθρώπος). Its meaning changes as it is applied in different contexts. Generally, it has two different meanings: (1) a feeling of general sympathy with our fellow human beings, whether the misfortune of another human being is deserved or undeserved, making it a different sort of sympathy from that which is a part of pity; (2) a moral sense of natural justice which is satisfied by deserved suffering or deserved prosperity, in other words, by the just punishment of the bad and the good fortune of the good. This second meaning can include "poetic justice," whereby punishment or reward seems especially suited to the character, such as when a clever, unjust man is deceived in an equally clever scam; however, this is not the kind of moral propriety Aristotle intends for the proper tragic effect. It makes more sense to the context in which the term φιλάνθρωπον is used in the Poetics that Aristotle intends the second meaning of our moral sense of justice, that is, moral propriety or moral proportion. Aristotle also intends that the avoidance of τὸ μισέρον must be kept in mind at the same time. Thus, pity is felt when the audience judges that two criteria are met, that there is human suffering and that it is undeserved, while fear is felt for the protagonist when he is judged to be a person like ourselves (ὁμοίον). The moral sense is secondary to these emotions, but it
functions critically in allowing the audience to feel these emotions, because this
sense determines which changes of fortune the protagonist experiences warrant the
appropriate moral response and emotion. This will make more sense when one
examines Aristotle’s criteria for the particular tragic situation that will elicit the
proper response to tragedy, a situation which lies in between the extremes of τὸ
μυαρὸν and τὸ φιλάνθρωπον.

The intermediate case of the neither very good (ευευικῆς) man nor the very
bad (σφόδρα πονηρῶν), a man who is better rather than worse, and who falls from
good fortune to bad fortune through a ἀμαρτία, is the tragic plot the poet should
aim for. This best kind of plot is balanced between extremes of moral outrage and
exact retribution, for both the morally outrageous and exact retribution eliminates
the arousal of pity which depends upon undeserved suffering, which would not exist
in these extreme cases. The protagonist who is more good than bad is more like us;
therefore, his misfortune arouses the proper degree of fear. The change of fortune
from good to bad for such a man will arouse the correct proportion of pity and fear
only when he commits a ἀμαρτία for which he is somewhat responsible, but which
is not of the sort that is morally repugnant, that is, vicious or depraved, since only
in this way can the poet create a crucial tragic imbalance between the tragic
protagonist’s action and the merit of the disastrous consequences. This means that
tragedy can not satisfy τὸ φιλάνθρωπον too much, which would happen if the good
were always rewarded and the bad punished; pity would not be aroused, the tragic
effect would not be achieved. Tragedy would descend into melodrama in this case.
It is interesting to note that what is best for a tragic plot lies in a range which is the
mean between extremes, that one aims for a critical balance, recalling Aristotle’s
doctrine of the mean in human virtuosity.
The term τὸ μαχρῶν is another word Aristotle leaves unexplained in his *Poetics.* It is a very strong word, denoting disgust and revulsion. Its force compels one to ask why Aristotle finds the fall of the very good man so shocking and repulsive.

The moral import of much of the passage where Aristotle makes this statement suggests that his reasons for his reaction are also concerned with his attitudes toward the moral implications of tragedy. The ideal tragic protagonist is clearly not the same as the ideal moral agent—the σπουδαίος in Aristotle’s ethics. For the σπουδαίος knows the mean; he knowingly practices human virtuosity and is skilled at hitting the mark of conduct appropriate for human flourishing. In tragedy the protagonist has not yet attained moral perfection. Although his intentions may be good, he is unskilled at being a virtuoso human being, he fails to hit the mean; in fact, he may not even know where it lies so that he can aim at the proper goal, guiding his conduct accordingly. Through his tragic suffering, however, the tragic protagonist and the audience learn the consequences of his error and its human significance. They come to know just how the protagonist deviates from the mean.

It should be noted that the word which Aristotle uses to designate the morally good man—the ἔπτεικής—whose fall to misfortune is shocking for Aristotle is nearly synonymous with σπουδαίος and εὐδαιμῶν in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* which is why Aristotle reacts so violently to such a calamity. For Aristotle to react with such moral revulsion indicates that the ἔπτεικής, in contrast to the tragic protagonist, is in the same category of high moral worth and skill as the σπουδαίος and the εὐδαιμῶν, so that he can never do anything morally flawed to become unhappy, however adverse his circumstances become. If he were to be the protagonist, not only would the proper tragic effect be destroyed, but so would the foundations of Aristotle’s whole ethical theory.
Besides being a treatise on tragic poetry, Aristotle’s *Poetics* is also Aristotle’s defense against Plato’s criticisms of poetry. As was mentioned above, Plato condemns poetry in his writings, particularly in the *Republic*, X. Plato maintains that poetry is a detriment to emotional self-control and reason; it is a lie which is far from reality and ultimate truth. When poetry tells stories that represent the gods as immoral, or where goodness does not bring any benefit, Plato believes it becomes a harm to human morality and a threat to civic harmony. He does believe, however, that poetry has value in educating the young toward virtue when the stories it tells are fashioned wholesomely, those which give good images of the gods, showing them as the cause of all good things. In contrast, Aristotle’s concept of κάθαρσις implies that there may be a benefit to the human being in arousing particular emotions, in educating these emotions, rather than repressing them.

Aristotle also believes that poetry was not meant to mirror ultimate reality; however, it does depict universals. Its truth is more philosophical and higher than the truth contained in the particulars of history (1451b36ff). Furthermore, the human being learns through imitation and he finds pleasure in this activity (1448b4ff). Since Aristotle defines tragedy as an imitation, the implication is that there may be some kind of learning process associated with tragic imitation, although it is not clear that this is what Aristotle has in mind.

Aristotle does not explicitly state that tragic poetry should improve a person’s moral judgment. Aristotle only asserts that tragedy has a moral effect—that if pity and fear are aroused in a certain way from the appropriate kind of plot, a κάθαρσις is achieved, and a benefit presumably is obtained. The many echoings in the *Poetics* of principles in the *Nicomachean Ethics* also hint that Aristotle considers tragedy to be directed in a certain degree and in some kind of unexplained way
toward the ethical dimension of human life. Aristotle’s descriptions of the proper tragic plot, the chief end of the art of tragedy, are imbued with moral values. With this kind of evidence, it seems appropriate to wonder if Aristotle did indeed see some moral instructional value in tragedy. It is certain that many others since Aristotle did and still do. Greek tragedy itself is full of moral lessons: thus, the tragedians themselves were no doubt aware of tragedy’s moral power and influence. It may be of benefit to examine some of the speculations about what it is that tragedy teaches.

Scholars ask why and what and whom we should pity and fear in tragedy; it is not clear—the tragic protagonist, ourselves, general humanity, or all three. These simple questions quickly transform themselves into ethical questions involving the nature of human life and its value. Most speculations about the educative value of tragedy center around Aristotle’s concept of κάθαρσις. Martha Nussbaum writes that pity and fear reveal the importance of the human good, as these are sources of illumination or clarification and therefore provide a richer, deeper self-understanding of the human being and of life. She bases her conclusion on the central meaning of κάθαρσις as a clearing up, a clarification. In Plato there is even evidence that κάθαρσις is used to describe the clearing up of the vision of the soul by the removal of bodily obstacles, which associates the word with the true or truly knowable. The κάθαρσις provided by tragedy, therefore, allows one to explore the pitiable and the fearful, intellectually and emotionally clarifying these emotions and their objects, thereby bringing us to a clearer understanding of ourselves in our essential humanity. Tragedy dramatizes such moments of awareness, illuminating how our judgments can become distorted and giving us "access to a truer and deeper level of ourselves, to values and commitments that have been concealed beneath defensive
ambition or rationalization." Moreover, Nussbaum also interprets Aristotle to intend that the appropriate response of pity and fear to a tragic situation is valuable in itself, a part of good character and who we are as human beings. These emotional responses would then play some part in our completion as human beings.

Amélie Rorty concurs with Nussbaum. She also admits that witnessing a tragedy will not make us virtuous—only the repetition of virtuous acts can do that. As spectators of a tragedy, we gain a recognition of who and what we are, the attunement of our emotions, the revelation that character determines one’s fate, a sense of a common humanity, a shared civic life, and a connection to the activity of a larger world order. As we learn to know who we are, she says, we will know how to act, what our obligations are and what is important in the way we interact with others. Tragedy shows us that we may be ignorant and forgetful of who and what we are; therefore, for a moment, tragedy rectifies our ignorance. Rorty recalls that Aristotle said that human virtuosity includes the capacity to have the right emotional reactions at the right time, in the right way, directed at the right objects, and she implies that tragedy somehow educates us in this capacity.

David Forte also believes that tragedy provides recognition and enlightenment of our human condition through its portrayal of human suffering. Tragic suffering, Forte says, did not force Aristotle into believing that the human condition is absurd, implying in this observation that Aristotle had reason for thinking the opposite. Moreover, to feel the appropriate pity for undeserved misfortune means the spectator must be a person of a certain moral sensitivity. Forte therefore expresses the moral sense of tragedy’s audience in a different way from that of our discussion of τὸ φιλάνθρωπον above. Aristotle also indicates a similar appraisal of the moral quality of the audience when he says in the *Rhetoric*: "In order to feel pity we must
also believe in the goodness of at least some people; if you think nobody good, you
will believe that everybody deserves evil fortune" (1385b35). Aristotle also argues
that feeling pity reveals some moral worth in the one who feels the pity:

If you are pained by the unmerited distress of others, you will be pleased, or at
least not pained, by their merited distress. Thus no good man can be pained by
the punishment of parricides or murderers. These are things we are bound to
rejoice at, as we must at the prosperity of the deserving; both these things are
just, and both give pleasure to any honest man...All these feelings are
associated with the same type of moral character. (1386b 26ff)

Aristotle obviously locates high value and moral worth in the person who can feel
pity in the appropriate circumstances; such a person is good and honest, he is aiming
at the mean in moral conduct and at moral virtuosity. Furthermore, such a person
is capable of reflecting upon tragedy and understanding its significance; therefore,
the pain of human suffering in tragedy is necessary for moral development; if, that
is, art can indeed educate moral judgment. It is evident, however, that in this
appraisal is Aristotle’s firm belief that there is worth and validity in viewing
humanity and the human condition as essentially good, that goodness brings pleasure
to those who are themselves good.

These are very grand speculations by a few contemporary scholars,
extrapolated from a handful of unexplained words and concepts in Aristotle’s
Poetics. We cannot know precisely whether any of them are what Aristotle had in
mind. They are evidence, however, of the effect tragedy may have on human
thought and emotion. Aristotle said that tragedy is an imitation of action and of
life, and the complexity of that action and life is reflected in the controversy that
surrounds his simple outline of tragic theory, as well as in these speculations about
what Aristotle means. It is certain that Aristotle does see tragedy as a valid form of
an imitation of reality; he sees it as having some mysterious moral function in moral
education by way of what he calls a κάθωρτις of pity and fear. The Poetics is, therefore, also compatible with the Nicomachean Ethics; it amplifies and complements Aristotle’s ethics, giving further validity and worth to striving to be good. It also shows that modern theory of tragedy is mistaken; tragedy is not nihilistic, nor is it hopeless.

Having established that Aristotle’s ethics and Greek tragedy are fundamentally compatible, we can now see that tragedy gives us representations of moral imperfection. This is especially apparent in Aristotle’s concept of ἀμαρτία, which echoes concepts in his Nicomachean Ethics that concern character and moral error. In tragic drama’s characters we see examples of human beings who fall short of the Aristotelian moral ideals, the σπουδαιος and the φρόνιμος. Therefore, we can explain the moral imperfection depicted in tragedy in terms drawn from the Nicomachean Ethics. We can thus elucidate as well how moral failure cannot be easily explained in terms of modern moral theory, how modern moral theory is flawed because it does not take into account the kind of person one is and lacks a consideration of the virtues in moral conduct. Therefore, we will now turn to an examination of two ancient Greek tragedies, since Greek tragedy best illustrates the tragic sense of life and moral imperfection, an examination of which can bring an even deeper understanding of what moral perfection means and what being morally good is all about. Moreover, we will discover that Aristotle’s ethical theory offers a solution to the complexity of human action and life in the development of moral depth.
Chapter 4

Two Greek Tragedies

Sophocles' *Antigone* is a Greek tragedy which powerfully confronts what it is to be a human being in the world. It questions and explores how the human being comes to choose and do what is most deeply right in life; as such, it is particularly applicable to Aristotle's ideal of moral perfection and human virtuosity. *Antigone* is foremost a story about a conflict of principles between two different people. It is on one level a story about a simple family conflict, yet on another level represents a conflict of much greater dimension and serious consequence, for in this story the conflict ends tragically in death and destruction. Sophocles' tragedy of conflict forces us to examine the dynamics of human conflict, i.e., differences in points of view and how these can be resolved and, especially, the place of the deeply right in human life, whether it should be pursued and how that can be done.

The conflict begins before the opening scene of the play. Polyneices and Eteocles, the brothers of Antigone and the sons of Oedipus, have fought and killed one another in a civil war for the kingship of Thebes. Creon, their uncle and now ruler of the city, has decreed rightfully by law that because he is a traitor, Polyneices is to be denied burial, while Eteocles, the city’s defender, will be buried with full honors. As the play opens Antigone is approaching her sister Ismene for help in burying their brother. She plans to defy her uncle’s decree, even though it means her own death by public stoning, because a proper reverence for the unwritten laws of the gods demands the burial of one’s own kin; therefore, she has the stronger claim to what is the most deeply right thing to do. Ismene, however,
refuses to help her sister. Afraid to defy the State and convinced of her weakness as a woman, she pleads with Antigone to consider and reflect upon what she does, reminding her of the ill-fortune which has marred their family history (49-68). Calling her "overbold" (47) and "mindless" (99), Ismene finally cautions Antigone against attempting to do the impossible (92). Antigone proudly proclaims that she will do the deed alone if she must, as it is noble and right, the loving thing to do, and holy, for it is more important to her to please the dead than the living and to honor what is honorable to the gods (69-77). In this first scene the conflict is suddenly amplified to something beyond just a civil war led by brothers.

Sophocles establishes in his prologue that the conflict in his play is a fundamental opposition between the human and the divine, the world of man's politics and state decrees versus that of religious duty and reverence to the laws of the gods. Within this broad framework, obligations to family clash fiercely with obligations to the State, while the needs and personalities of individual family members also tumultuously collide. In the interaction and contrast between the two sisters, Sophocles reveals Antigone's proud and willful nature. She is much like her father, Oedipus. Her harsh and scornful treatment of Ismene's gentle caution and understandable fear is startling. Creon's edict appears to offend Antigone's own strong personal pride. She is short-tempered and sharply sarcastic when opposed, and as she speaks of love for her dead brother she appears to have no comparable share of love for her only sister. Antigone's courage to do the right thing in the face of death is also certainly heroic, and her steadfast, uncompromising adherence to religious principle and justice is highly admirable, but her convictions are noticeably narrow and extremely onesided. Although Ismene tells Antigone it is senseless to do what is excessive (68), Sophocles' first scene appears to question the rightness of Antigone's doings and her motive much less than the excessiveness of
her manner, the violent stubbornness with which she seems to direct her deed.

The Parodos which follows the prologue sings of the triumph of Thebes’
vecity over its enemies and of Zeus’ abhorrence of the boasts of a proud tongue,
the pride that goes before a fall (100-161). Its song, therefore, seems to point back
to Antigone’s pride in the previous scene and forward to Creon in the next scene
where he puts forth his own proud principles of kingship and proper rule. Needless
to say, this background music hints ominously of impending disaster for both uncle
and niece. Creon’s speech reveals that he cares only for the safety of the city and
he will show no mercy to his foes, which means no mercy for Polyneices. Justice
is defined strictly as good will to Thebes and only those who show the proper good
will in obedience to Creon and the city will be honored by Creon (209-210). His is
a power, the chorus declares, which extends over both the living and the dead (211-
214). Like Antigone’s, Creon’s wrath is quickly aroused when he meets with
opposition. In his position as a new and untried ruler, Creon is obviously insecure,
and when he learns of Polyneices’ mysterious burial, he quickly denies any
workings of the gods in the event and insists in his fear and paranoia that it is the
work of insurrection and conspiracy against him (280-314). Creon will listen to no
voice but his own.

When Creon confronts Antigone, the same excessive stubbornness in their
characters and their unyielding positions are even more clearly demonstrated. As
they stand side by side, inflexibly polarized, neither one listens or learns from the
other. Creon angrily accuses and threatens Antigone, fearful that he will look weak
in the eyes of his subjects if he allows anyone, especially a woman, to go
unpunished (484-485); he is convinced that the State will suffer and he will be
shamed. Antigone appears determined to die, as she proudly defies and taunts
Creon, calling him a fool (470). She coldly rejects her sister Ismene’s wish to
share her death; but when Ismene asks why Antigone causes her this grief, since it in no way benefits Antigone (50), Antigone appears to soften a little and tells her sister that if she laughs at her, she does so from her own pain (52). In this brief statement is a very important point about human conflict, for it is the pain of grief, fear, anger, hurt pride, anguish over injustice, and other various pains of heart which are often the underlying cause of conflict between two people. While vengence, a retaliation of pain for pain, is an attempt to relieve one’s pain, such reprisal more often heightens and extends the conflict, rather than resolving it; vengence does not heal the heart’s seering pain. People in conflict thus persist in their irrational behavior, even when it gives no real benefit to either party, so that the conflict inevitably continues, as it does here in the Antigone.

In the second choral ode, the famous "Ode to Man" (332-383), Sophocles poses the essential conflict between the human and the divine in terms of the awesome power of man to conquer and control his world. Man’s ingenuity and resourceful skill allow him to sail the seas, plough the earth, tame and domesticate the animals of both land and sea. With his intelligence, man has taught himself speech and thought and civic law, and how to protect himself from the harshness of his environment, as well as from diseases that afflict his body. Only death limits man, reminding him that he is still mortal.

Although this ode praises the world of man and his abilities, it is also deeply ironic, containing a subtle warning. This image of man as controller of the earth and life shows him to be out of balance and out of control. The human being confidently and completely subjugates what is naturally wild and uncontrollable without acknowledging the power and place of nature—of the divine—in the scheme of the universe. In the last strophe, the ode notes that man’s ingenuity of art is not stable; it is entirely unpredictable, since it brings him sometimes to evil and
sometimes to good. Unless, the ode seems to warn, man honors both worlds
together, both the laws of the land and the justice of the gods, he will be uncitied
(ἀπολιείς 370), that is, homeless, rootless, or like a ship without a harbor or anchor.
This rootlessness is, furthermore, associated with a reckless overboldness (τὸλμας
371) and what is not right and good and noble (τὸ μὴ καλὸν 370). Clearly, Creon
and Antigone are implicated in these words, since, ironically, they both believe they
can control their fates absolutely, and that they alone know what is completely right
with no acknowledgment of what may be right in the claims of another. Antigone’s
motive may be more right and good, but the manner in which she asserts her views
is, like Creon’s, deficient in goodness. (More will be said about this point below.)

When Haemon confronts his father in the center of the play he brings a voice
of calm reason to the stage (635-765). With great diplomacy and care, Haemon
considers his father’s position and sensibilities as he pleads for the life of Antigone,
his bride to be. He first appeals to reason, seeming to balance the extreme view
expressed in the Ode to Man, as he says: "the gods caused reason to grow in the
minds of men, and it is the highest of all our possessions (683-684)." He speaks
out on behalf of the people of the city who keep silent out of fear of Creon’s anger
and he tells his father that they sympathize with Antigone and believe the burial of
Polyneices is right and a glorious deed (690-700). Finally Haemon attempts to
resolve the conflict by appealing to what is even more deeply right, saying:

ἐμοὶ δὲ σοῦ πράσσοντος εὔτυχῶς, πάτερ,
οὐκ ἐστιν οὐδὲν κτῆμα τιμώτερον.
τί γάρ πατρὸς βάλλοντος εὐκλείας τέκνοις
ἀγαλμα μείζον, ἢ τί πρὸς παίδων πατρί;
μὴ νῦν ἐν ἡθος μοῦν ἐν σαντῷ φόρει,
ὡς φης σὺ, κούδεν ἀλλα, τοὺτ' ὀρθῶς ἐχειν.
ὅτις γὰρ αὐτὸς ἡ φρονεῖν μόνος δοκεῖ,
ἢ γλώσσαι, ἢν οὐκ ἄλλος, ἢ ψυχὴν ἐχειν,
οὕτω διαπτυχθέντες ὑφηγοῦν κενοὶ.
To me, father, there is no possession more honorable than your faring in good fortune and prosperity; for what is a greater ornament of glory to children than their father flourishing? or what to a father than his children (flourishing)? Do not now bear one disposition only in yourself, that as you say, and nothing else, that (this) is right. for whoever thinks that he himself alone is wise, or has a tongue, or a mind, which no other (has), these men, when opened and spread out, are seen to be empty. But it is not shameful that a man, even though he be wise, learn many things and not be too rigid. You see beside winter streams how as many trees as yield preserve their branches from danger, but the ones that resist perish altogether, root and branch. And in this same manner whoever, having stretched taut the ship’s sail-rove, yields in no way, he overturns the ship and sails for the rest of the voyage with the benches turned upside down. But yield your anger and grant a change...it is much the best for a man to be by nature full of understanding, but if that is not possible, for this is wont not to turn out in this way, learning from those speaking well is a good and noble thing. 108

In these words Haemon gently advises his father that the most glorious and honorable thing in life is flourishing and good fortune, which implies his father does not, or will not, have such a life if he proceeds in his present course of action and extreme state of mind. Haemon continues by giving his description of what real flourishing is. In contrast to Creon’s autocracy and rigidity of mind, the successfully flourishing human being is not so narrow and single-minded that he cannot admit learning from the wisdom of others. To be inflexibly proud implies a superficial and false wisdom, an emptiness in the soul which has no real meaning or purpose. To illustrate the truth and value of such flexibility, Haemon uses
examples from both nature—unbending trees uprooted in a winter’s flood—and the world of man—the sailor who loses control of his ship when he holds the ropes too tightly, so that the sails cannot accommodate the force of the changing winds. Both of these colorful examples warn of destruction for an unyielding and unaccommodating stance in the changing circumstances of life. Anxious to resolve the conflict, the chorus takes up Haemon’s message, encouraging father and son to learn from one another, as they conclude; “it has been well spoken on both sides (720-725).” Creon, however, refuses to yield to his son’s wise words, insisting that disobedience to the State and to himself, the king, is the worst of evils; consequently, in the pain of their disappointment in one another, the argument once again rapidly deteriorates into unproductive taunts and bitter name-calling.

Teiresias, the blind and ancient seer, finally persuades Creon to be reasonable, although their meeting is not without conflict (888-1090). Teiresias enters the stage humbly led by a young boy. The young and sighted are thus symbolically contrasted with the old and blind, the folly of youth and the wisdom of age, two views of life and two levels of strength and experience are aiding one another. “We come on this common way, two seeing by one, for the way is possible for the blind by a guide” (888-990), Teiresias says, as he offers his own true guidance and that of the divine world he represents to Creon. As he warns the king that he is standing on the razor’s edge of fate (996), it is clear he is pointing to Creon’s own stubborn and blind refusal to consider the wise guidance of others, a denial which will lead in the end to disaster. Bird signs and the failure of sacrificial rites have told the seer that the city is polluted by the unburied corpse of Polyneices (998-1022). The world of man is unhealthy; it is unbalanced and out of control because Creon’s decree did not account for the existence of a divine world order and deeper
obligations to what is truly right. As Haemon had done before him, Teiresias bids Creon to think and correct his wrong, and so cure the city's sickness (1023-1027). "Self-will brings folly," and "there is no strength in slaying those already dead" (1028-1030), Teiresias wisely reasons, but Creon again refuses to listen and, holding on to his narrow, short-sighted principles of kingship, he accuses the old man of shamefully taking bribes (1033-1047). Their meeting therefore also degenerates into an exchange of insults and frustrated anger as had those in earlier scenes.

Teiresias' dire warning of impending disaster frightens Creon and the chorus of elders. The authority of his aged wisdom and his seercraft's link with the mysteries of the divine make Teiresias much more difficult for Creon to ignore. Out of fear, therefore, and no clear recognition of what is truly right, Creon at this point hurries to bury Polyneices and to free Antigone from her prison cave; but he arrives too late. At the play's end corpse lies upon corpse, Antigone, Haemon, and Creon's wife Eurydice have all killed themselves, cursing Creon's unwillingness to resolve the conflict. His family destroyed, his life in ruins, now joyless, Creon himself becomes a living corpse (1167, 1288). In utter despair, Creon now sees all that he should have seen before. Deeply contrite, he finally admits his stubborn blindness (1261-1265). He has learned a bitter lesson, having, Creon remarks, been smitten on the head by a god (1272-1275). The worlds of the human and the divine, therefore, meet and touch in this tragic moment of Creon's recognition of the deep truth of his own human existence.

Scholars note that Antigone is exceptionally rich in words describing reasoning processes and intellectual understanding. Throughout the words and actions of the play's characters, calm and tolerant reason is variously contrasted with emotional passion and foolishness, and its painful consequences. Antigone and Creon
consistently and passionately resist appeals to reason, rigidly fixing their minds upon only one set of principles and one claim of right. They both leave no room for negotiation and change. By remaining at the extremes of behavior and thought, there is then no hope of compromise, no middle way, and no resolution of the conflict. Minor characters, such as guards and messengers, are shown in the process of successful deliberation—the to and fro and back and forth consideration of various points of view in order to find the right thing to do for the particular circumstance. This process is obviously lacking in the minds of Creon and Antigone, and is aborted by other characters who leave the stage in angry frustration after confronting the impenetrable wall of these characters' stubborn wills. In the end, however, Creon does come to learn the error of his ways and, although too late, he shows himself to be capable of reform. The chorus closes with a last verse that reminds the audience of what Creon has learned:

\[
\text{πολλῷ τὸ φρονεῖν εὐδοκιμοῖς}
\]
\[
\text{πρῶτον ἃπαρχει χρή δὲ τὰ γ᾽ εἰς θεοὺς}
\]
\[
\text{μηδὲν ἄσεπτειν; μεγάλοι δὲ λόγοι}
\]
\[
\text{μεγάλας πληγὰς τῶν ὑπεραύχων}
\]
\[
\text{ἀποτείσαντες}
\]
\[
\text{γῆρα τὸ φρονεῖν ἐδίδαξαν.}
\]

By far, being wise is the first part of happiness.
And one must not treat in an unholy way the things of the gods.
For great words of the over proud teach wisdom
in old age by repaying great blows. (1347-1353)111

Once again, these last words recall the Ode to Man and its depiction of man's great ingenuity of mind existing apart, unbalanced, and independent from an equal regard for the world of the divine. Antigone thus teaches that the wisdom and greatness of man must be joined with a reverence for the gods in order to achieve happiness and avoid the "great blows" of disaster and human suffering.

Some scholars suggest that the opposition between Creon and Antigone actually
represents a permanent and irreconcilable conflict between the human and the
divine. The human being is thus eternally subject to a struggle between two
concepts of the meaning of life and is, therefore, doomed to the kind of suffering
portrayed by Sophocles' tragedy. In Sophocles' plays, however, the divine shapes
and guides the world, and the human being must find a way to shape himself and his
life in accordance with its eternal laws; but it also is by the "ultimate greatness
and value of man that the divine order prevails". This implies that the divine
and human are not actually apart, but intertwined and interdependent, just as
Sophocles indicates in his image of Teiresias and the boy standing before Creon;
for, like them, the human and the divine exist in some kind of mutual support and
need. As the tragedy dramatizes in the person of Creon, the human being is often so
blindly ignorant of circumstances that he requires some guidance to find his way
through life in the world, while the meaning and power of the divine is made
manifest by what is also meaningful and of the greatest value in the human being,
such as the greatness that we perceive in Antigone's heroic deed.

In Aristotelian terms Sophocles' Antigone presents two examples of what is not
completely right and good and noble (τὸ μὴ καλὸν 370) in moral conduct.
Antigone and Creon do not express τὸ καλὸν in their actions. Unable to act in
accordance with this divine imperative that is rooted in the heart of nature, they
stand apart from a true and stable good and right to which they are as human beings
ultimately responsible. Therefore, as the "Ode to Man" describes, Antigone and
Creon are "rootless," they forfeit their rightful place in the natural scheme of the
cosmos. In different ways their conduct is reckless and overbold, out of proportion
with circumstances. In the last verse, "being wise" and "wisdom" are translations
of the phrase "τὸ φρονεῖν," a verbal form of the same root from which φρόνιμος
(the man of practical wisdom) and φρόνησις (practical wisdom) are derived. This word and the lesson offered in this verse also recall Aristotle’s account of practical wisdom in his ethical theory. Both Creon and Antigone are deficient in this faculty, for they miss the mark, they fail to hit the right target offered by moral virtuosity; they therefore suffer the consequences of their failure to adhere to a standard of moral perfection. For Antigone and Creon were capable of much more as human beings, as it is certain that the death and destruction which ended their story could have been avoided. Yet, Antigone and Creon reacted as they did because they were people of a certain sort, with characters and habits fixed in ways that made their conflict inevitable. We, as spectators to their drama, can feel for them, recognizing in the blindness of their character’s stubborn wills and their inability to find a harmonious middle way a familiar pattern of human behavior. We learn in their story just how such conduct can lead to disaster, and how valuable is the proper proportion of moral virtuosity and practical wisdom.

In the second example from classical drama, Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, we will find another story of conflict. It is, in fact, about several intensely passionate and violent conflicts—a conflict between husband and wife, between two countries at war, between two powerful gods, between citizen and king, and finally between two irreconcilable rights. The scene we shall examine, in particular, dramatizes the internalized conflict of the human mind and heart that seeks the good, but cannot find a way to achieve it. It therefore depicts the complexity of a moral dilemma— with all its agonizing intellectual and emotional tensions. This drama further highlights the suffering of the human being and the self-reflection that it brings. Thus it is an example of what is required of the human being as he faces the moral complexity of human life. Even more than the Antigone, this tragedy of Aeschylus
shows us how difficult it is to make correct decisions that will lead to our human flourishing.

The *Agamemnon* is the story of the murder of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek expedition to Troy, by his wife Clytaemestra, in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigeneia at the beginning of the war. In the opening prologue a watchman is wearily sitting in the darkness of the night atop Agamemnon's palace, waiting for a beacon light signaling the end of the Trojan war, the return of his lord, and the return also of normalcy to the household below. He speaks in prayer of the gods, of the ordered and eternal movements of the stars and the inevitable burdens the changing seasons place upon men. Immediately, we are thus informed that the action will take place in these two very different, although interacting, realms—the human and the cosmic or divine—which gives Aeschylus the means to universalize and overlap the personal views and action of his characters and themes with a larger more complex cosmic truth. Human passion and pathos therefore coexist with the mystery of the divine.

The watchman rapidly goes through a whole array of mood swings. He is bored, then fearful and apprehensive, an insomniac with bad dreams. There is a "man-hearted" woman in the palace—a perverse situation to be sure and fraught with uncertainty, for she is an adulteress as well, waiting and plotting evil vengeance with her lover. The watchman then weeps, remembering happier times before the war and prays fervently for a release from his anxieties. Sudden happiness comes when the beacon lights up; he shouts for joy, but checks himself as he remembers Clytaemestra and her lover Aegisthus, wondering what will happen when Agamemnon finds out. In the end, the watchman can only hope with affectionate loyalty and in a foreboding tone that his king's homecoming will somehow happen.
Helpless to influence the inevitable workings of cosmic fate, symbolized by the dark night sky which arches silently above him, the watchman turns to watch and wait to see the action unfold, still standing in the darkness, looking and hoping for the light as do we, the audience. All this tumble of emotion with intimations of past and future events intertwined in the present gives a sense of great confusion, ignorance, helplessness, and foreboding uncertainty on the human plane of existence, while the larger mysterious, more orderly universe is controlling and subjecting the mass of humanity to its will.

Aeschylus thereupon shifts from the watchman as private individual to the chorus' public collective voice in the Parodos, the first choral ode, where the watchman's emotions are duplicated, but expanded in more detail. The chorus begins its song similarly to the watchman with reference to the long years of waiting for the end of the war. Then, in brief narrative, they allude to its cause, its hardship, and the stubbornness of the gods' anger and the certainty of destiny's eternal course. In recollection their thought encompasses the past, the present, and the future with ominous hints and considerable anxiety. We learn that this chorus is composed of old men, elders left behind by the expedition. Their wisdom of age and experience is undercut by wistful expressions of their bodies' weak frailty and they weep for circumstances that seem hopeless. In their collective stance they seem to emphasize even more vigorously the weary laboring of human life and the helpless bewilderment of a human world subject to the cosmic unknown.

The anxious bewilderment is continued as the chorus returns to the present circumstances with an appeal to Clytaemestra to release them from their anxiety and an emotional state which vacillates wildly between dark thoughts and shining hopes; it is further reflected in their excited questionings about Clytaemestra's activities.
These questions do not seem to expect answers, but indicate instead the intense confusion and worry of mind which "eats" their hearts. Ironically, Clytaemestra performs ritual sacrifice in dutiful gratitude for the war's end and her husband's homecoming while she surreptitiously plots his murder, an act which will not heal, but fulfill the chorus' fears of eminent catastrophe. Such ironic juxtapositioning of the chorus' foreboding and Clytaemestra's presence suggest that on some level of consciousness the chorus knows of her secret intentions, as did obviously the watchman, and this is, likewise, the source of their fear.

The rest of the ode follows the same format as these first stanzas and the opening prologue with still further expansion and repetition in imagery, emotion, and theme. The chorus returns again to recollections of the past and the beginning of the Trojan war with the story of the eagle portent which predicted a successful outcome of the war, but simultaneously incurred the wrath of Artemis, resulting in a conflict of wills between Zeus and Artemis which eventually led to Iphigeneia's sacrifice. At this point the narrative flow of the ode is interrupted by another appeal for a release from their extreme anxiety in a prayer to Apollo to pacify the goddess' anger, and in a long reflective hymn to Zeus. Following the hymn, the chorus vividly describes the horror and pathos of Iphigeneia's cruel sacrifice, bound and gagged like a sacrificial goat upon the altar. We see the Achaean kings responding with horror at the prospect of Iphigeneia's sacrifice, while Agamemnon is envisioned debating his choices—divine anger, the pride of a king and leader, or the slaughter of his own child. Anguished emotion thereupon clashes violently with reasoned thought, and Agamemnon makes his fatal decision, hoping that all may be well. Finally, the chorus, similarly again to the watchman in the prologue, refuse to speak more of evil. With a wait-and-see attitude they hope for good fortune, but
then yield their thought once more to an ominous future and sufferings imposed by
cosmic justice.

Aeschylus' powerful imagistic style makes his poetry complex. He rapidly
piles his descriptive adjectives, appositional phrases, and images one upon the other
while imposing multiple layers of meaning upon single images. He does not move
in straight lines, but in clouds of poetic image and meaning. Each line is dense
with poetic association and implication, creating highly visual dramatic scenes which
are incredibly alive with complex and intense emotion. The metrical rhythms and
sounds of the Greek language further express and reinforce the meaning and emotion
of his poetry. Thus, it is difficult in prose to describe the powerful effect of
Aeschylus' art, yet through his poetic skill it is clear in the first few hundred lines of
the Agamemnon how Aeschylus defined the tragic sense of life. It is contained
poetically throughout the emotional and thematic content of the prologue and
Parodos, but encapsulated most effectively in a single paradoxical refrain the chorus
sings at the end of three of the parodos' stanzas: σιλινος σιλινον ειπε, το δ' εὖ
νικάτω. The refrain can be translated: "Sing sorrow, sorrow: but good win out in
the end." Keeping in mind both past evils and an uncertain future, the chorus of
erss of hope mixed with hopeless despair, of evil and good together, a blend
seen entwined throughout the ode and which comes to a climax in three reflective
stanzas in the center of the Parodos—the choral hymn on the nature of Zeus (160-
183).

The tense, almost frantic anxiety of the elders and the correspondingly
condensed syntax of the previous stanzas before the hymn suddenly relax and release
their thought and poetic melody into a calm, soothing contemplation of the
unfathomable cosmic order which is Zeus. The elders seek comfort and a reason
for all the violent doom—an answer to why for the sake of just punishment against Paris, Iphigeneia and the innocents of Troy must suffer. In this they are also expressing the eternal tragic question—the awful why of human suffering.

Aeschylus answers the chorus' painful questioning with an enigmatic paradox and another good in evil—learning through suffering. Zeus' wisdom, or cosmic law, says that only learning through suffering can heal and redeem mankind; in the moment of this particular ode and tragedy, wisdom's lesson is moderation, or self-control (σωφρονεῖν 181). Aeschylus, however, dramatically and paradoxically sets his theme of moderation against the wasteful destruction of innocents and the excess of passions of avenging murder which crowd turbulently round about the thoughtful hymn. It is also unclear exactly what or who the unavoidable pains of life teach here in the poem, as Aeschylus repeatedly depicts the wills of two gods and two claims of right pitted agonizingly against one another. In yet still another dramatic paradox, he calls the gods' grace violent (183). The elders nevertheless seem to gain comfort from Zeus' wisdom that there is meaning and purpose in human suffering, however mysterious. At the same time the clash of thought and the tension created in the opposing mix of energies of good and evil question how this can be. Amid the certainty of the cosmic order, the elders are subtly reminded of the precariousness and uncertainty of human life; in the end they get no conclusive answer at all to their agonizing dilemma.

Thus, the chorus, which represents humanity at large, remains suspended between the emotions of hope and despair just as their hymn to Zeus is itself suspended dramatically and enigmatically in the center of the parodos. As they resign themselves to faith in Zeus' majestic omnipotence and the mysterious justice of cosmic law, they simultaneously question and doubt its meaning and justice.
The poetry of Aeschylus' tragedy therefore mirrors the pattern of human life, and represents a certain view of ultimate reality. The human being is suspended, that is, balanced or poised, between opposite poles of hope and despair, as well as between many other alternatives such as the simple and complex, good and evil, the rational and irrational, knowing and not knowing, seeing and not seeing himself and the nature of his universe. Human life is thus fraught with many complex emotional ambiguities, paradoxes, ironies, and tensions. Sometimes life will tip closer toward hope and at other times it will descend into despair, yet the emotional substance of human life is always present as this constant tension, a psychic material of life which the human being must learn to cope with and learn from in order to flourish and find completion as a human being.

Tragedy appears to emphasize despair, yet as Albin Lesky's study of tragedy shows, the essence of tragedy, and therefore of human life also resides in hope; for tragedy is, as Aristotle says, the imitation of life. Each tragedian founds his view of tragedy and ultimate reality in the belief that there is purpose and meaning in the world and likewise in the terrible human suffering he portrays. Without the crucial tension between hope and despair, classical Greek drama would lose its tragic stature and its profound and ineffable meaning, as also perhaps would human life itself. Against our will and in a painful perplexity of heart, just as do the chorus of elders in the *Agamemnon*, we, the spectators of tragedy, are brought by tragedy's poetic art to sense meaning and purpose, however silent and unseen, beyond the veil of life's confusion, uncertainty, and suffering, even when we cannot explain exactly what it is we see and feel.

As spectators of tragedy we can also sense the disharmony in these tragic conflicts, in the interrelationships between the characters themselves and in the
relationship of the individual characters with a larger, objective moral order. In terms of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Poetics* we can specify what constitutes this disharmony by summarizing the characters’ moral imperfections—the "certain *hamartia*" that brings each to his downfall. Almost immediately in Antigone and Creon we see evidence of the vice short-temperedness (* ὀπικυδρία*), a quickness to anger that is an indication of excess according to Aristotle’s list of virtues (*NE* II.7 1108a5-10). Aristotle calls the mean state in relation to anger "gentleness (*προδότης*)," a calm, steady, unconfused state (*ἀτάραχος*), which is praiseworthy because one then feels anger appropriately for the right motive and against the right person and in the right manner and length of time (*NE* IV.5 1125b26ff). Antigone and Creon were clearly justified in their anger with one another; Antigone had willfully broken Creon’s state decree, while Creon was shamelessly denying a proper burial to his own kin. However, the manner of the expression of their anger was defective, as neither’s actions proceeded from a calm, steady temperament. If Antigone and Creon had possessed this particular moral virtuosity of gentleness, their minds would surely have been more open and flexible to negotiation and reason, and the destruction of their lives averted.

Antigone also gives signs of a deficiency of fear and an excess of confidence, missing the mark of Aristotle’s criteria for true courage. Aristotle defines the truly courageous person as one who endures his fears and displays confidence appropriately—according to the merits of each situation, as reason directs him, and, especially, for the sake of the true end of courage, for what is beautiful, or noble (*τοῦ καλοῦ ἐνέκα* *NE* III.7 1115b6ff). The most fearful thing of all for the human being is death; thus, the most courageous act a human being can perform is to endure death nobly. Antigone does indeed endure the fear of death; yet, in her zeal
and determination to oppose Creon, she also appears to rush recklessly toward death as an escape from her sorrow and grief. According to Aristotle, this is not true courage, for to seek death as a means of escaping from our troubles is a weakness; we then submit to death for the wrong reason—to escape evil rather than because it is the noble thing to do (NE III.7 1116a14-15). Another false motive of true courage that Antigone exhibits is when one rushes toward danger when driven by anger. This can resemble true courage, but it is actually an excessive confidence that derives from feeling ($\pi\acute{a}\delta\omega\varsigma$), rather than because one intends to act nobly and as reason demands (NE III.7 1116b24ff).

In addition to his defective expression of anger, Creon's moral imperfection also includes an excessive fear of disgrace. Aristotle asserts that fear of disgrace is the mark of a decent man (NE III.6 1115a10ff); a proper shame is one of Aristotle's virtues (NE IV.9 1128b10ff). Creon, however, is so fearful that he will look weak in the eyes of others if Antigone is not punished for defying his decree that he does not consider the broader implications of what he does. As Creon comes to realize at the end of the drama, his actions are not balanced by a fear of disgrace for not giving his kin a decent burial, not giving due reverence to the laws of the gods. This character defect of Creon's could therefore be described as a deficiency in his sense of shame, a defect which contributed to his downfall.

Agamemnon's imperfection is similar to Creon's in that he also fears for his reputation as a king, the disgrace it would bring him if he did not lead the Achaeans against Troy. Yet he, too, is not sufficiently shamed by the part he plays in the death of his daughter. Like Creon, his responsibilities to kinship are not as strong as those he feels in his role as ruler. Scholars dispute whether Agamemnon had any other choice than to sacrifice his daughter. Is he unfairly trapped, the innocent
victim of the gods, or morally responsible for his daughter's death, or, finally, just one more tragic piece of a larger, inevitable cosmic pattern? It is very characteristic of Aeschylus, however, to unite personal free will and the compulsion of necessity or external coercion in tragic situations; the characters in his dramas often are, paradoxically, both responsible for their decisions, and yet not altogether responsible, being subjected to a necessity imposed upon them by the divine order. Nevertheless, it becomes more clear in later scenes of the drama that Agamemnon is also a very ambitious man and extremely proud of his achievements in the Trojan war. Because of his excessive pride, he fails to discern Clytaemestra's deceit and is consequently murdered. These later scenes suggest as well that Agamemnon's extreme ambition and concern for royal honor likely did play a role in his decision to sacrifice his daughter. His death was therefore required as atonement for his guilt in the horrible act. Because of Agamemnon's vanity, his excessive and inappropriate pursuit of honor, Aristotle would say that Agamemnon failed to hit a mean in conduct which he describes as great-souledness (μεγαλοψυχία—also magnanimity or high-mindedness). For, in the end Agamemnon plainly claims a greatness that he does not deserve; his claim is not matched by equal greatness in goodness of character or deed (NE IV.3 1123a35ff).

Clytaemestra is a complicated personality and an extreme character. This "man-hearted" woman is an adulteress and murderer. Adultery and murder have no excess or deficiency in Aristotle's ethics; they are bad in and of themselves--there is no right way to perform these actions (NE II.6 1107a10-26). In the intensity of her hatred and revenge, Clytaemestra is completely insensitive to the pain of others. Overcome by her passion, she shows no remorse or shame for what she does. Boldly defiant and deceitful, she exceeds in confidence and anger, and she lacks a
proper sense of shame. Although we can sympathize with and understand her pain and resentment, Clytaemestra is an example of how one loses one’s humanity by responding badly to misfortune and suffering.
Chapter 5
Moral Depth

In Sophocles' world the gods are neutral and impersonal, neither just nor evil, yet they mysteriously impose standards upon the human world, obligations of right and wrong which are revealed in oracles and omens. The human being's imperfect knowledge may mistake and misinterpret these signs of divine law and he suffers tragically in consequence: however, although Sophocles simply accepts the divine order and does not try to explain or excuse it, he also does not appear to resign humankind to inevitable suffering. There is much in the Antigone to suggest that the human being is responsible for the good and evil he chooses amid this mysterious rule of the divine. For tragedy occurs when the human being cannot harmonize himself with the circumstances of life imposed both by his human world and the guiding order of the divine, as Sophocles demonstrates most vividly in the character of Creon.

Sophocles' tragedy, therefore, offers some measure of hope that a tragic conflict such as Antigone's can be avoided or rectified through true wisdom and a harmonious balance within the worlds of the human and the divine. This thought that the tragic can be avoided and the emphasis throughout the Antigone on the role of reasoning and deliberation in determining the deeply right thing to do call to mind Aristotle and his Nicomachean Ethics. In his ethics, as one should recall, Aristotle defines human happiness, the ultimate human good, as the completed fulfillment of one's human potential through a virtuosity in being human. The human being prospers and flourishes when he is able to judge and choose appropriately what is
the good and the best thing to do at any given moment. This is a life lived according to Aristotle's mean, which defines the correct proportion of feeling and action required for living well and being good as a human being. When the human being functions properly he is poised flexibly between extremes of excess and deficiency in his feelings and actions and thus is always prepared to meet any contingency in life with harmony and proper proportion. Adherence to the Aristotelian mean in moral conduct and striving for one's human virtuosity therefore functions for Aristotle very like the guiding order of the divine in Sophocles' 
Antigone. Without regard for this essential mean in human behavior, the human being cannot fulfill his true function as a human being; he is thus rootless, without a home, or like a ship without a harbor. Unbalanced and out of control, he cannot guide himself to the ultimate human good; like Creon, he is vulnerable to the "great blows" of disaster and suffering.

Although Haemon in the Antigone did not speak in these terms of a mean between extremes when he spoke with his father, nevertheless, his picture of proper human flourishing based upon a genuine depth of wisdom and tolerant flexibility of mind aligns itself well with these Aristotelian values and ideals. To Haemon, and for the spectator, what Creon cannot see in himself is obvious, that his behavior is dangerously extreme. Creon's feelings of insecurity make him stubbornly willful and rigid in holding absolutely to his point of view. His attitude toward his feelings and actions are clearly out of balance: completely unaware of himself, he is out of control and headed for disaster through no fault but his own failure to fulfill his ultimate function as a human being. In Haemon's plea to his father to yield, to reflect upon, and learn the wisdom in others' opinions, he describes the man who is too rigid and thinks himself alone to be wise as "empty" inside:
For whoever thinks that he himself alone is wise, or has a tongue, or a mind, which no other (has), these men, when opened and spread out, are seen to be empty. (707-709)

Haemon's picturesque description becomes a vision of the human being as a superficial caricature, a hollow shell, of little true worth and inner substance. Such a human being lives the semblance of a life, being empty of what makes the human being complete and fully human. Although Haemon does not elaborate, simply describing this inner substance of the human being as being "full of understanding (ἐπιστήμης πλέων 721), his words recall Aristotle's discussion of practical wisdom, the faculty that deliberates well and discerns truth in harmony with correct desire. Practical wisdom guides the human being to the right means to attain his good and it is this which Creon has lost sight of.

Antigone, one feels, has a better grasp of the ultimate good in the circumstances of her brother's death and burial, yet her inappropriately belligerent manner tells us that her practical wisdom is also deficient. The right means to achieve her goal eludes her; she has not found truth in harmony with her desire nor in proportion to the circumstances. Antigone seems much more determined to die for her cause than to try to find a way to convince Creon to do what is reverent and right for a member of his own family. It is also evident that neither Creon nor Antigone alone could have found a way to resolve their conflict, regardless how practically wise either one of them was. As both are at fault, both characters would have had to yield their stubborn convictions and, together, have chosen to reconcile their differences through a deliberation about what is most deeply right in their particular circumstance. This is, however, in life as in the tragic imitation of life,
never as easy to accomplish as it would seem.

Using Aristotle's criteria for human virtuosity and moral choice, it becomes easier to see that both Creon and Antigone are deficient in character and goodness, as neither act in conformity to the Aristotelian mean between extremes, or achieve the stability and security of the supremely happy man Aristotle requires to flourish as a human being. Each also, one feels, is fully responsible for choosing how he acts and is, in the circumstances of the play. Although Antigone is clearly more deeply right and in harmony with the divine order of the world in her desire to bury her brother, her proud and abrasive manner accentuates the human conflict; the manner of her behavior is out of proportion, and therefore vice, even though her motive is not. Creon, too, shows excess with his uncompromising stubbornness and autocratic attitude. Although his basic principles of kingship and concern for the safety of his city may be sound, in the context of the situation Creon's reasoning is plainly out of bounds. After all, what real harm would have come to the city by burying Polyneices?

Creon does, in fact, act out of sincere moral convictions. He is trying to do what is right in his role as ruler of Thebes. However, as discussed previously, Creon's character is flawed. He exceeds the mean in relation to his state of anger and he errs in regard to his sense of shame, failures that eventually lead him to disaster. Moreover, his *hamartia* also includes a failure to find the mean of justice (*δικαιοσύνη*), a moral virtuosity which Aristotle maintains is what regulates all proper conduct within society, including the relations and attitudes individuals have with others as well as those they have towards themselves. According to Aristotle, justice produces and preserves happiness for the political community (*NE* V.1 1129b15-20). It therefore requires the practice of perfect moral virtuosity to be
displayed toward others (NE V.1 1129b26ff). Justice seeks to promote the advantage of another (NE V.1 1130a5), but without a violation of proportion, or what is deserved in relation to the person and circumstances (NE V.1 1131b16ff). Aristotle, therefore, describes the true ruler as the guardian of what is just, equitable, and fair. A king should labor for the benefit of others in his kingdom; he does not take a larger share of what is good for himself alone, otherwise he becomes unjust and a tyrant. For his virtuous acts, a ruler is then paid back in honor and privilege (NE V.6 1134a30ff).

Although Creon intends to do what is good and right, his actions are unjust; he does not consciously and conscientiously deliberate and choose a good that is beneficial to all. He is not intrinsically unjust, however, since his actions are not motivated by malice, but are chosen from feelings of anger and fear which prevent him from seeing the harm he does to himself and others. With the exception of Clytaemestra, who does act out of malice and forethought in plotting her evil deeds, this could be said of the other characters discussed in these tragic dramas. They all err in regard to justice; unknowingly, they unjustly harm others and themselves by their actions and through the deficiencies of their characters. They fail to consider that a virtuosity in being human includes justice, attentiveness to the good one provides oneself by one's proper relations to others in one's life and society.

Throughout the play one cannot help repeatedly recalling Ismene's question to her sister Antigone when she asks: "Why do you cause me these griefs when it brings no benefit to you (50)?" One wonders what would have happened to their conflict if her question had been seriously considered. Would the virtue of justice have then been considered and acted upon? If Antigone had responded to Ismene and Creon by saying calmly, but firmly: "I understand how you feel, but I must do
this because my conscience demands that I cannot do what is base and unjust to the
gods and my brother," what effect might her words and demeanor have had on the
outcome of their conflict? Similarly, if Creon had simply told Antigone: "I am
disappointed you disobeyed my decree. Explain to me your reasons and I will
speak with my advisors so that we can decide what is the next best thing to do," how
might Creon and Antigone have interacted and possibly have resolved their
differences of view? Such responses, if sincerely meant and openly received,
would indicate characters of greater self-awareness, self-control, and flexibility than
they reveal in the drama. They would have required the development of such
Aristotelian virtues as justice, practical wisdom, mildness of temper, and, in the
example of Creon, even courage, the courage it takes to acknowledge one’s
insecurities and fear. The presence of such virtues in the characters of Antigone
and Creon would have offered a chance that the final tragedy and its human
suffering could have been prevented.

Antigone is often held up as an example of the faultless tragic hero who falls
into misfortune in spite of the supreme rightness of her cause. Although her
stature may indeed be heroic and admirable in many respects, she could also be
viewed as a moral zealot, a fanatic who blindly opposes all moral principles except
her own. Nevertheless, one can easily imagine a superior and far more heroic
Antigone confronting Creon in a manner which is as honorable and worthy as her
courageous deed. At the play’s end Creon proves that he has the capacity to know
what is truly and deeply right; therefore, perhaps, Antigone could have succeeded in
persuading Creon to change his unholy decree, if she had approached him in just the
right way. It also may be true that the play could end in no other way; Antigone
had to perish so that Creon’s world would be destroyed and the divine order
And yet, no doubt as Sophocles intended, there is a feeling of discomfort and silent protest at hearing such a final verdict. How can it be that Antigone’s courageous pursuit of the deeply right must result in death and destruction, one asks oneself; there must be a reason and a better way. Aristotle’s study of ethics shows that there is indeed a reason for such evil; it results from the violation of the deeply right, a deeply right that is symbolized in Sophocles by the divine order. Moreover, although it is difficult and rare to achieve it, there is, indeed, a better way to pursue the deeply right in human conduct than that which results in an inevitable conflict between two people. It is clear that both Sophocles and Aristotle would agree that the solution to tragic conflict and its human suffering lies somehow in the striving to be the best possible human being one can be.

The deeply right thing to do, or what one ought to do in particular circumstances, is, according to Aristotelian standards, not something which comes about by chance. As we discussed earlier, Aristotle requires that the act must arise from a firm and stable character, from one who acts knowingly and chooses the act for its own sake (NE II,4 1105a26ff). Therefore, one could do the right thing outwardly, such as Creon’s attempt to free Antigone, but if the act is performed out of fear, as in the case of Creon, or a desire for personal gain, it would only be the appearance of the right thing and not actually the deeply right in the purest terms. Aristotle explains this most deeply right when he says a true physician is not one who simply performs an operation or administers treatments, but the one who does so in a certain way and with a certain disposition of mind, knowing how and to whom and when to apply his skill and knowledge so as to effect a cure (NE V.9 1137a5ff). Likewise, the one who does what is deeply right would not just perform the act, but he would do so out of an intrinsic knowledge and deep commitment to
what is right beyond simply his intention and performance. It also requires a willingness to follow through and persist in bringing about what one knows is deeply right, such as when a government worker exposes corruption in the government at the risk of losing his job and damaging his career. Choosing to do what is deeply right, therefore, involves a choice which is characterized by moral goodness in its most complete sense, where manner and motive and the substance of the deeply right are harmoniously and appropriately united in the action of an individual. This is what Aristotle means when he says that choice is what determines a person's character even more than his actions (NE III.2 1111b30ff).

In Aristotle's moral theory character is therefore primary in determining our right actions since character and the choices which arise from and also shape our character determine the quality of our action. The relationship between character and action is an intricate one and is not well understood by most modern moral philosophers. One contemporary moral philosopher, Stephen Hudson, writes that if we are to take the virtues (i.e. moral virtuosity) seriously, we must view our present categories of moral action differently and recognize that virtues, hence character—since virtues are the cultivation of character and its traits—are indeed, as Aristotle believes, a determinant of what is the morally right thing to do. Moral theorists usually describe right action as those actions that our moral obligations and duties require. Hudson maintains, however, that what is morally obligatory is not the same as what one ought to do. He explains that these two expressions—what is obligatory and what ought to be done—actually represent two different dimensions of morality, which he names "the Requirements of Morality" and "the Counsels of Moral Wisdom."

Our moral obligations require us to act in certain ways that limit our freedom
because our actions may adversely affect the good of others. They are actions that are demanded of us and for which we are morally liable if we fail to perform them, actions such as obeying traffic laws and resolving our disputes in a court of law rather than through a gunfight in the street. Hudson argues that morality (as it is understood by modern moral theory) cannot, however, demand that we be virtuous, that we act with generosity, or courageously, or with good-humor or friendliness; it cannot require that we become persons with a particular sort of character. Modern moral theory refrains from telling us how to be, as its focus is primarily on how the human being acts. For virtuositities of character to be expressed, the counsel of our moral wisdom must guide and direct us to act in these ways, in the way in which, as Aristotle described, a virtuous person would act. Our moral wisdom tells us that we ought to act in this manner, but we are not required by any rules or principles of morality to do so. For modern moral philosophers this distinction is a complicated issue and they debate whether there is a conflict between our moral obligations—the requirements of moral conduct—and principles of human virtuosity—our demand for excellence in character.

Hudson reminds us that the moral worth of acts counseled by our moral wisdom actually derives from an appraisal of the agent and the moral worth of his intentions, or motives. Thus, in the dimension of the morally required, an obligatory act can be deemed morally praiseworthy even when done from improper motives, such as selfishness, or fear, as we saw in the example of Creon; while from the perspective of the counsel of moral wisdom, an act can have some moral worth when it is the wrong thing to do, but is done from a good motive. However, there is a danger, Hudson warns, of transforming acts of virtuosity into an obligation that is morally required when we say virtuous acts ought to be done,
subsuming the function of character as the action-guiding principle to a system of rules that dictate our conduct. In addition, since virtuosity of character reflects itself in good motives, some moral theorists will tend to define virtues as supplementary and secondary to principles of moral obligation since they provide a willingness to act on principles of morality.

Hudson points out that our everyday moral experience informs us that, on the contrary, virtues of character do indeed guide us in making our moral decisions about what we ought to do. It is not unusual when faced with a moral dilemma to ask ourselves what kind of person ought we to be in this situation—generous, honest, or considerate, or even angry, assertive, or indifferent. We are in this moment seeking guidance from our moral wisdom, asking of it what we are to do, but the manner of our actions would not necessarily be what we would have to do in the sense of a moral obligation. We are free to choose our actions and the manner in which we act, however, we are then, as Aristotle might say, fully responsible for the quality and consequences of what we choose to do.

As we have seen, Aristotle’s treatment of moral virtuosity and character refers moral actions to the ideal type of person who exemplifies a particular virtue. Hence, a courageous act is only courageous when it is of the sort a truly courageous person would do in similar circumstances. Hudson explains that if courage is described thus, as characteristic of a type of person, "it is by understanding how the choices, desires, values, emotions, actions, and will of that person cohere into a whole that we understand the virtue of courage." In these words Hudson further illustrates the depth and completeness which is obtained in human action when it derives from a character-based ethic such as Aristotle’s. It is in context of a whole action and the wholeness of the person performing the action that the deeply right is
Hudson distinguishes acts which are performed *in accordance with* virtue from those done *from* virtue. An act done in accordance *with* virtue is an act which is typical of the virtue—it has the appearance of virtuous action, but is not the action of a virtuous person; for example, a miser can perform a generous act, yet remain a miser. Such an action is right action, however, and has a certain value independent from the agent's character. An act that reflects the moral worth of the agent is done *from* virtue and it is this kind of an act which is descriptive of the deeply right—a characteristically motivated action which is chosen for its own sake, as valuable in itself, and done as a virtuous person would perform it.

Hudson concludes, in words that recall Aristotle's ethics, that sound moral judgment of the sort needed for resolving conflicts between virtues and obligations cannot be "bottled up in a system of rules and principles which will determine what ought to be done in any situation." Greek tragedy, as we have seen, also vividly depicts one's human need for sound moral judgment, and the difficulty in attaining it. "What ought I to do?" is the question morality must answer, paralleling the question posed by tragedy "What shall I do?" and the philosophical question of "What is the good?" In fact, this moral question of *ought* partakes of both questions asked by tragedy and philosophy. It includes both the urgency of tragedy in the search for the right thing to do and the desire for the good which is posited by philosophy. Moral truth requires that this question of what ought to be done cannot be independent of character—the question of what sort of person the agent ought to be. Hudson gives credit to Aristotle for seeing that the answers to these questions are interdependent and, because of this view, he states that Aristotle's moral theory stands upon much firmer ground than those of most modern moral philosophers.

Aristotle also provides a sound and stable foundation for his moral theory by
integrating the purpose of the human being with the order and purpose of the cosmos. In the *Antigone*, the human being brings disaster upon himself when he does not consider his place in the divine world order and follow its guidance. In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and in the *Poetics* there is little mention of the gods themselves, but the divine and the divine in man function much for Aristotle as the gods do in Sophoclean drama. The divine is manifested in the expression of τὸ καλὸν—the beautiful—and the thrust of all of nature to express the beautiful in a perfection, or completion, of being becomes the moral imperative of the universe, an imperative to which Aristotle anchors his moral theory and the activity of man. Without this anchor, Aristotle's theory and the human being would become, as is poetically imaged in the "Ode to Man" in the *Antigone*, like a ship without a harbor, rootless, homeless, out of control and headed for catastrophe. Therefore, although Aristotle cautions against an inflexible system of rules and principles for moral conduct, in his ethics the human being is securely bound or obligated to some higher authority than himself in a way which guides and preserves him as he makes his way through life and the world. 131

This Aristotelian obligation to a divine imperative to do right and be morally good is, however, quite unusual in the fact that it is not obligatory in the sense that we are compelled to be good from an external source, as we would be if the obligation came from a duty or rule of law imposed upon us. Aristotle maintains that we should do the right thing just because it is right and because it also expresses τὸ καλὸν. A virtuous act will only be truly virtuous when this is the only underlying motive. Moreover, we choose to do what is right (and therefore beautiful) from our own free will. We are not forced to do so by anything other than our intrinsic desire to be morally good. The fact that the impulse to be truly
moral must come from within and that our moral decisions are free and not compulsory gives the human being full and absolute responsibility for his moral actions and character.

This kind of total responsibility for our moral actions and the freedom to choose them is quite different from other moral theories that are based on external obligations to moral rules and principles, as indicated by Stephen Hudson’s argument above. In Aristotle’s moral theory we are fundamentally responsible to ourselves, to who we are and hope to be as human beings. In our function as human beings, we strive to be particular kinds of persons who desire the acquisition of particular human virtues (virtuosities) in order to become complete and whole, morally perfect. We therefore do not fail a particular moral law when we fail to be morally good; we fail ourselves and our capacity to be the best we can be. Aristotle’s theory gives us the awesome burden of complete responsibility for our moral choices, while at the same time the freedom to pursue them with a great deal of individual creativity. As long as we accomplish in our actions and feelings what is essentially and intrinsically right and good, we choose freely how and who to be throughout our lives. Although there are those who would doubt the effectiveness of Aristotle’s ethics for our modern world, it would seem that a moral ethic which originates from within the human character and which is responsible for expressing what is most deeply right and good in the world and the human being has the greatest capacity to bring a coherency and wholeness to human morality. Moreover, it promotes a quality of moral goodness that enobles humankind. 

Helmut Kuhn describes the relationship between Greek tragedy and philosophy, specifically Platonic philosophy, as two creations which subserve a common cause, each being involved in three related aspects of thought: (a) "the working out of an
antithetical vision of reality," (b) "a solution to the problem of suffering and evil," and (c) "a deepening of the human self-consciousness." As we have seen in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the ancient Greeks did not envision human suffering as a simple conflict between good and evil; reality consisted of complicated tensions between various antitheses. This view compelled the ancient Greeks to struggle for greater clarity in their contemplation of the world and human existence.

Both tragedy and philosophy address the problem of human suffering in different ways. According to Kuhn, when confronted with this problem, tragedy asks the question "What shall I do?" We saw this vividly portrayed in the frantic anxiety of the chorus of elders in the *Agamemnon*. Philosophy, in contrast, Kuhn says, goes one step farther and asks "What is the good?", a question which is also often implicit in the emotional turmoil on the tragic stage. The search for clarity in the confusion of life we see in the action of tragedy and the rational logic of philosophy highlight the role played by the human agent in his suffering. In tragedy responsibility for human suffering is muddied; in almost the same moment suffering can be blamed on the "will of the gods" and then implied to be, either wholly or partially, caused by a "moral flaw" in the protagonist--his human frailty and limitation--as if the tragedy could have been foreseen and prevented if only the protagonist were wiser and more self-aware. Philosophy represents a development in thought which increasingly emphasizes this self-consciousness of the agent and his responsibility and freedom of choice in doing good or evil. This trend in thought meant that classical belief in a cosmos seen as a sacred world order, with the human being as a dependent part of that order, was rendered irrelevant, and as Albin Lesky's study points out, the loss of this belief was the death of classical tragedy.

Kuhn argues, however, that there is an underlying harmony between the tragic
and the philosophic points of view. This harmony lies in the idea of catharsis. As we saw in the hymn of Zeus in the *Agamemnon*, the elders experience a kind of catharsis; they are purged of their anxiety and confusion in a moment of contemplation of the wisdom of Zeus, and as they, in turn, receive some kind of clarification of understanding of their place as human beings in the world order their god represents. While the elders get no real answer to their frantic question of "What shall we do?", their passionate despair is answered by a calm, irrational hope that all may be well in their anticipation of coming evil. Kuhn calls this "catharsis by passion" the poetic achievement of a "unified vision of reality." Philosophy, on the other hand, he says, obtains a catharsis which "assuages passion in contemplation." The contemplation of philosophy must bravely confront the realization of what it means to be a human agent and the recognition of the inescapable antinomies of reality, and in the process somehow be soothed as were the elders in the *Agamemnon*. Both tragedy and philosophy, Kuhn implies, are closely connected through the harshness and unyielding barrenness of their raw desire, philosophy’s ceaseless yearning and want for an answer to its persistent questioning about the nature of man and his universe is consistent with tragedy’s desire for peace from the agony of suffering.

Other literary genres dramatize the sad and serious realities of the human condition, but none achieve the sort of emotional dynamic and dramatic tension that define the tragic sense of life that we see in classical Greek tragedy. Greek tragedy could have easily slipped into melodrama; in fact, a few of Euripides’ plays have actually been called melodramas. Melodrama also depicts the nature of the human condition, however, it is a sentimentalized and idealized version of life which relies upon artificial and sensationalized plot constructions to maximize the
emotional effect on the spectators. This type of drama is represented by the silent film which shows the hero rescuing in the nick of time the fair maiden who has been tied up on the railroad tracks by the dastardly villain. Add to this scene the musical accompaniment of "Hearts and Flowers," music designed to wring every possible ounce of emotion from the audience—everything is intended to produce tears, sighs, and finger-biting suspense. The characters are unambiguously portrayed as either villains or heroes, who live in a world where good always triumphs over evil and the happy ending is the rule rather than the exception. Moral issues are superficially explored, although their significance is greatly exaggerated in the play. At the opposite extreme, the medieval morality play over-emphasizes the moral and didactic purposes of drama in plays that allegorize the struggle between good and evil, with characters who are personified portraits of virtues and vices. These very serious plays were designed to encourage the spectator to live morally in order to be saved from damnation after death. Thus, the morality play symbolized a humankind that was constantly threatened by the dangers of its own immorality. It is important to note the contrast of these other dramatic genres with tragedy to demonstrate how unique and profound the achievement of Greek tragedy is, what a subtle and sophisticated expression of the human heart and mind it is, and how easily its significance as a meaningful commentary on human life can be destroyed.

Aristotle appeared to recognize the damage that would be done to tragedy by the excesses of melodrama and of too overtly moralistic and didactic intentions. In his *Poetics* he warns the tragic poet not to depend on sensational spectacles to achieve his tragic effects, that this is an inferior method and not appropriate to the purpose of tragedy (1453b1ff). The superior, more artistic poet achieves pity and fear not through extremes, but through the subtle and complex manipulations of a
well-constructed plot which, one assumes, makes tragedy itself a much more effective and significant imitation of life than other dramatic genres. What we learned through the construction of the prologue and Parodos of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* was that tragedy does present a very distinctive world view and emotional tone—that the human being suffers in a world of uncertainty, between circumstances which may become good or which may result in evil; he is suspended unknowingly in a tension between hope and despair. Because of the skill and sophistication of Aeschylus' art, his imitation of life is quite accurate in its portrayal of the intense confusion and anxiety the perplexity of human suffering brings to the human being. The experience of the power and the depth of its human anguish thus quickly becomes a direct confrontation with the meaning of life and the purpose of the human being in the world.

In the *Agamemnon* we see examples of unquestionable moral imperfection. Clytaemestra is an adulteress, and eventually she murders her husband, Agamemnon. Agamemnon is himself responsible for the death of his daughter, Iphigeneia. These acts are clear excesses, well beyond the limits of the mean of moral virtuosity; in fact, they have no mean, adultery and murder are entirely bad (*NE II.6 1107a6-26*). Nevertheless, Aeschylus provides his drama with complex contradictions and conditions which make these crimes somewhat understandable, yet difficult to judge absolutely. Clytaemestra is deeply hurt by the death of her daughter. Her desire for revenge, at least, is justified. Agamemnon struggles with the decision to allow the slaughter of his child, but he is caught between the will of two gods, knowing whatever decision he makes means disaster and the wrath of some divinity (211). Where Agamemnon seems to have no choice, necessity (ἀνάγκη), he implies, makes the choice for him (217). He, therefore, forfeits the
moral responsibility for his decision, giving up his own free will and deluding himself that this was the right thing for him to do. Divine decree mandated that his forces seek revenge against Troy for the abduction of Helen, thus, Agamemnon relinquishes his fatherhood in favor of military leadership. Simultaneously, along with the action, Aeschylus skillfully manipulates our sympathies with his poetry. Our minds respond to Agamemnon’s inner conflict, sympathizing with his desire to fulfill his duty as king and the requirements of Zeus’ will, but our hearts are made to feel the horror of the sacrifice of his daughter and its terrible wrong. We, like the chorus of elders, feel pity for these people, as we feel fear for their horrible crimes.

How does one choose to do what is right and best in such complex and contradictory circumstances? Although Aeschylus provides an extreme example in this play of a moral dilemma in which every choice leads to disaster, it is essentially no different from moral conflicts many people frequently encounter. When a co-worker and friend is stealing from an employer, what does one do? Confront the friend, hoping he will do the right thing, and return what he took, voluntarily? Or, go to the boss and turn the friend in? Either way, one risks losing a friend and being embroiled in an unpleasant controversy. Likewise, a nurse knows of an incident of malpractice. A highly respected physician is the cause of the death of a patient, but he hides this from the family, falsifying the patient’s records so that no one else will ever know. The nurse also knows that no one will believe her if she tells the truth. Should she risk her job and reputation by exposing the physician’s deceit? Or, finally, consider a situation in war. Should an atomic bomb be dropped on innocent civilians if it means the lives of thousands or millions of others will be saved and the war ended? How, indeed, does one choose the deeply right?
What about the consequences of our error, if we make the wrong decision?

Agamemnon should have prevented the sacrifice of his daughter, regardless of the consequences for himself and the war against Troy. Creon should have listened to Antigone and allowed the burial of her brother. But the predicament of these moments in these men's lives and the makeup of their individual characters made such decisions difficult for them, as they would be for anyone. Like Agamemnon and Creon, most people avoid the deeply right and delude themselves into thinking that what they do is the only right and good choice available. The choice seems too difficult to search more completely for what may be more truly right, the fear too great for the painful consequences, consequences which may include a painfully honest and critical self-appraisal of one's moral responsibility and character. We too often choose what is immediately expedient without thinking deeply over our choices, without evaluating fully our motivations and the consequences of what we do, or whether they reflect truly and deeply who we are as individuals and our ultimate purpose as a human being.

Owen Flanagan's essay suggests that because such moral decisions are difficult to make, morality can offer us no solutions, no guidelines or standards for our conduct. However, the nature of morality is not easy or neat. Human nature, itself, is also not simple, but complex. The search for solutions to our moral dilemmas will therefore be as equally difficult, reflecting the complicated nature of the object of our perceptions and thought. Aristotle himself admits that his theory's outline is rough; we must fill in the details. Aristotle's moral theory, however, does give us a solution to the complexity of our moral decisions and a standard to which we may aspire. Aristotle's solution is moral depth and the standard is moral perfection. It remains for us to find the way to fill in the details and smooth out the
rough outlines of moral conduct.

As Kuhn remarks above, the ancient Greek's struggle for clarity in understanding the problem of human suffering and the antitheses observed in reality corresponds with a deepening of human self-consciousness, and a greater awareness of moral responsibility. The chorus of elders in Aeschylus' tragic drama demonstrate the process of reflection upon a difficult, even seemingly impossible, moral decision. They question themselves and others, they review past events and speculate upon the future, and they search their hearts as well as their minds for the appropriate response to their dilemma. As the representation of a collective humanity, the members of the chorus search deep into their own self-knowledge and experience of life, and outward into the nature of the universe. They reach toward a moral truth which will tell them what is the best way to feel and act in these particular circumstances. In this drama, the elders fail to clarify completely the confusion of their world, but their understanding does deepen; their response is the result of a deep and full consideration of what they feel, believe, and perceive to be true and real and good. It comes most sincerely and honestly from the depths of who they are. Though they find no final solution to their worry and fear, these elders do achieve the beginnings of the development of moral depth.

The elders however are paralyzed by their anxiety and confusion. They do not represent the possession of a true moral depth, the depth of moral understanding that comes from a complete awareness of moral responsibility and the demands of a higher objective moral order. Moral depth means that wise decisions can be made with the consideration of a whole moral truth in mind. As Susan Mendus suggests in her essay, for conflicts to be resolved successfully in ways that satisfy our sense of true justice and moral integrity, we must recognize the value of what is lost in the
In our reflection upon moral issues, we therefore honor the validity of serious claims to right and goodness, even if we must deny them a part in our ultimate decision, as Agamemnon would have had to deny his duties of kingship in order to save his child. We keep this view of a whole moral truth in mind as we shape our feelings and actions. A deep and wise consideration of all the particulars of a circumstance will therefore result in a more honest appraisal and deeper understanding of our moral responsibilities; our moral life will be less corrupt, our choices and decisions more accurate and sound, more true to the particular situation and to our capacity to attain moral virtuosity as human beings. With moral depth we regain something of high value, even if we cannot always reconcile our most troubling conflicts, even when we make mistakes. We live a life more free of self-delusion, more honest and true to ourselves as human beings, one which is, ultimately, more reflective of the worth of the "humanness" of our human nature. We allow the beautiful to shine through from our souls.

Since tragedy reaches so deeply into the heart of human experience and touches upon the metaphysical in its profound questionings, it can be used as a valuable tool for ethical reflection and insight. So often tragedy concerns itself in some way with human excellence, or virtue, even when it depicts "corrupted virtue," or vice. Hence, tragedy can be looked at as a critique of human virtuosity, an assessment of the value and significance of particular virtues and moral ideals in a society and human life. Such an examination poses many difficult questions and problems; however, a serious and honest reflection upon the ambiguity of virtue in different contexts and the nature of tragic error forces one to confront the complexities involved in moral choice, the contemplation of which can then enhance our moral discernment and understanding in making moral judgments and defining moral
responsibility. Moreover, by highlighting the problem of the relationship between human virtuosity and happiness, tragedy reveals how deeply embedded our moral beliefs are in conceptions of the good life and the fundamental purpose of human existence. Through tragedy, humankind's deepest needs and aspirations are dramatized along with the human being's inability to control the course of the world. A study and evaluation of tragedy may thus show that the tragic is an inescapable part of life, yet it can also teach the ability to discern where and how it is avoidable and how, by maintaining a critical stance toward our deepest moral values, we can prevent ourselves from unjustly inflicting suffering upon others. As we come to know our moral failures and inadequacies, however, we can also reaffirm the ultimate value and significance of moral virtuosity in our lives and our human worth.  

Such affirmation of our moral perfection, or virtuosity in being a human being, in the ethical reflection upon human virtuosity and values encountered in the experience of the tragic sense of life is fundamentally a concern with moral depth, the deep understanding of what is ultimately worth caring about in the living of a humanly good life. We have seen how Aristotle's ethics directs the human being toward this same deep understanding, for the development of moral depth is a natural accompaniment of the human being's striving toward moral perfection. But what exactly is moral depth? John Kekes gives a very rational account of moral depth which is reminiscent of Aristotle's requirements for moral perfection. He first describes moral depth as the opposite of moral superficiality and in some way connected with an understanding of truth, the ability to see an underlying unity beneath the surface of the complex variety of phenomena in the world. More specifically, moral depth requires a deep understanding of how to live a good life in
which personal satisfaction coincides with moral merit. People living a good life derive their satisfaction and enjoyments from activities which produce good and avoid evil. Moral depth, therefore, results when one achieves the rare balance between understanding this general ideal for a good life and an understanding of particular conditions in one's own specific individual life which can guide one to a good life.

Kekes describes more explicitly just what these conditions of life are. From the point of view of reality there are some things over which the human being has little or no control. This reality which can be described as a kind of necessity and which is referred to as the "will of the gods" in Greek tragedy (the symbolic significance of the night sky in the watchman scene in the Agamemnon), is indifferent to human well-being, or morality. It includes the impersonal, unexplainable, and unavoidable facts such as natural disasters, susceptibility to disease, genetic talents and predispositions, chance meetings and accidents. From the human point of view, which is, in contrast, very concerned with human welfare, these necessities of reality are contingent, that is, dependent upon uncertain conditions—chance, the possible, the unforeseen, and the unpredictable. Moral depth requires an understanding that the human being is always vulnerable to calamity, while still maintaining that balance of understanding which preserves the goal of living a good life. A realistic understanding and acceptance of the contingency of life means one does not resign oneself to a fear of failure and disengagement from life, but instead makes the best effort to attain a good life by responding to misfortune with balance and control rather than emotional overreaction and self-destructive behavior. The understanding moral depth gives allows the human being to guide his actions so that he can focus on what is truly
important in life, rather than wasting his life in trivialities, and also enables him to avoid potentially dangerous situations. An understanding of the contingency of life means, however, that unfortunately, no cosmic justice exists to right moral wrongs. We can only depend upon our own persistent efforts to improve the imperfect human justice system to correct moral injustice. Kekes concludes his discussion in words that echo Aristotle by stating that the development of character traits required for moral depth, such as balance, self-control, clear self-knowledge and understanding, stability and persistence, are rare and difficult to acquire, but nevertheless well worth pursuing, since good lives are unlikely to be achieved without moral depth.

In our modern life the gods do not impose mysterious standards of right and wrong, yet a moral standard for us is still elusive. Modern moral philosophy, in the main, has rejected moral perfection. There is no clear standard for moral goodness such as we find in Aristotle's ethics. There is no standard for the deeply right, as there is no standard for good character. Modern moral philosophy is deeply flawed. Its methods are ineffective in providing a coherent and workable moral theory that can confront the moral dilemmas of our time. The confusion in our modern moral theories is reflected in the general chaos of modern moral life, particularly in our political and legal thought and the decisions of our social institutions. Our legal system concerns itself only with the minimal requirements of moral goodness. Moral law is excluded from a place in the law of our human community. It exists but, invisibly, above and beyond the reach of the law. As a result moral conduct has little worth since morality has come to mean simply how one finds the means to escape punishment from the law, rather than how to reflect our true worth as human beings. A story from Africa illustrates this distinction.
When a man came before a group of African elders to settle a dispute about the division of his crops, the elders told him: "We have the power to make you divide the crops, for this is our law, and we will see this done. But we have not power to make you behave like an upright man." The power of human decency originates from within, but human decency must first have value in a society for its truth to be promoted.

The influence of liberalism promotes a conception of the self that stands alone, apart from the self-reflection that gives meaningful self-knowledge and moral depth. In this conception the worth of the human being becomes somehow less, although this is not liberal theory's intention. The human being becomes detached and empty of a complete understanding of himself and his place in the world as a flourishing human being. This recalls Haemon's speech to his father where he describes a true human flourishing. Haemon says that flourishing comes to the person with a particular disposition, a character that is open to learning the wisdom of others. He is flexible to the unpredictable and changing circumstances of life. The flourishing human being thus gains experience and knowledge; at his best he is "full of understanding." He therefore possesses a human wisdom that brings happiness and the ability to withstand or avoid the "great blows" of misfortune and suffering that will be met in life. Haemon's words and the lesson of the tragedy of Antigone allude to Aristotle's standards of moral conduct and successful human flourishing--the στονδαίος, the φρόνιμος, and the εὐδαίμων--examples of human beings who stand as a part of the cosmos, integrated and whole, at one with themselves as human beings and in harmony with the world, the possessors of moral wisdom and moral depth. They imply as well that without a moral theory which promotes moral perfection, hence the development of a coherent and promising...
morality that nurtures the completeness of the human being, there is little hope that a true human flourishing can be achieved. We risk becoming empty inside, without real substance, performing our actions and living our lives without the completeness of their human worth.

In Plato's *Apology* Socrates says that "for the human being, the unexamined life is not worth living (38a)," for Socrates believed, like Aristotle, that what is most human is to be the best one can be by developing his ἀρετή, his human virtuosity. In order to do this successfully one must examine oneself rigorously to find truth, wisdom, and justice in his actions and to pursue these ends, otherwise, life as a human being would have little value. Such rigorous self-examination requires ideal standards to which one may compare oneself. To discard the ideal of moral perfection, of human completion and flourishing, as unrealistic and unattainable, or even unattractive, therefore, diminishes and devalues what is most deeply and divinely human in us and threatens morality's real meaning. Human imperfection may be much more usual, but it is not more human or more admirable. Without ideals to which we can aspire, the human being would be cast adrift into the dark meaningless void of the totally tragic world view. The anguished questioning and the painful suffering of tragedy show us that there is some expectation or standard for human life which is not being met; and that, although it is much more difficult and rare to achieve, as Aristotle repeatedly said, striving to be truly good and most human offer humanity its only hope for a stable and enduring happiness and a meaning and purpose which make life worthwhile.
Notes

1Iliad 24, 476-532.

2Republic II. 379d.


7Ibid., p. 150.


9Ibid., p. 213.


11Ibid., pp. 42-43.

12Ibid., p. 48.

13Ibid., p. 60.

14Ibid., p. 53. Sentence is general summary of pp. 53-60.


16Ibid., p. 296.

17Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). This paragraph and the following six are taken from Sandel’s book.


20 Sandel, op. cit., p. 177.

21 Ibid., p. 179.

22 Ibid., p. 180.

23 Mendus, op. cit., pp. 191-201. This and the following two paragraphs are taken from her article.

24 Ibid., p. 200.


26 See Aristotle, Metaphysics V.16 1021b12-1022a4, trans. Hugh Tredennick, for Aristotle’s full definition of τέλειον—that which is "perfect" or "complete"—and as he relates it to goodness.

27 In accord with John Hay’s essay and Professor Richard Walton’s suggestion, I also prefer "virtuosity" to "virtue" or "excellence" as a much more accurate translation of what Aristotle means in the term ἀρετή. "Excellence" is not descriptive enough for the active sense of skill and ease in performing one’s best as a human being that Aristotle seems to imply in his theory, while "virtue" has Christian connotations and a "goody-two-shoes" image.

28 λόγος is a difficult word to translate into English. Generally, it means the power of reason and the power of language combined; therefore, it is the ability to give a reasoned account via human language.


30 This is the third account of the parts of the human soul. The first and the second occur in Book I, Chapters 7 and 13.

31 See Chapter 3, p. 76 for a discussion of συνεξεταιος.

32 I have taken this translation of κυρία from two English translations of Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics—Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. Martin Ostwald and Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics, trans. H. Rackham. κυρία is an adjective meaning "having power or authority over," and therefore "authoritative," or "supreme." Aristotle is thus talking about ultimate virtuosity, the perfected and complete manifestation of moral virtuosity, which is the perfect union of moral virtuosity and practical wisdom, as is discussed below. Virtuosity in being human, then, becomes something more than just knowing the good and discerning the right means to the good; it is a human virtuosity that has actively achieved moral goodness in the most complete and genuine sense possible.

34MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

35Ibid., p. 162.

36Ibid., p. 162.

37Ibid., p. 149.

38Ibid., p. 154.


41Ibid., pp. 145-159.

42Ibid., pp. 145-151, 154-159.

43As with many ancient Greek terms, it is often difficult to find one English word that will adequately translate the Greek meaning. καλός, its derivatives, is just such a term. It contains a constellation of inferences, as is explained in the next paragraph. I have consistently translated this word as 'beautiful,' because in my studies in classics this is the term that is most familiar to me and is embedded with all the meanings implied in the word 'καλός.' However, 'noble' is often used as a translation because it implies notions of the just, good, and right, along with an image of the noble beauty of a warrior's prowess and heroic striving that underlies much of Aristotle's thought. It loses a little of the beauty of the divine in man and his accord with the cosmos however, a concept that is also in this word, according to my sources. See also Joseph Owens, "The Kalon in Aristotle's Ethics," in *Studies in Aristotle*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981) pp. 261-277. John Hay relies heavily on this article in his essay, as do I in this thesis.

44Hay, *op. cit.*, pp.159-182.


48See NE VI.7 1141a34-1141b1 where Aristotle expresses his belief that it makes no difference if the human being is superior to other animals (or, by implication, to other human beings), other things in nature are far more divine, such as the sun and the stars. Also, see his very eloquent explanation of the beauty of the
humblest part of nature, as well as nature as a whole in Aristotle's *Parts of Animals* 1.5 644b22-645a35.

49 MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, pp. 148, 158.


52 This is the category of tragedy and connects with Aristotle's *Poetics*.


60 Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-46.


68Ibid., p. 169. Translation of lines beginning from line 884 in The Trojan Women from The Complete Greek Tragedies, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore.

69Lesky, op. cit., p. 200.

70Ibid., p. 147.

71Ibid., p. 175.

72Ibid., p. 171.


74Aristotle, Poetics 6 1449b24-28, trans. G.M.A. Grube.


77See Aristotle, Categories 8.10b8. See also NE 1099a23, 1113a25, and 1166a12-13 for other examples of this usage.

78Aristotle, Poetics, 4 1448b24-7; 1449a2-6.

79Golden, op. cit., p. 289.


81Ibid., p. 43.

82Ibid., p. 55.

83Smithson, op. cit., pp. 4-7.


85Kaufmann, op. cit., pp. 51-56.

86Rorty, op. cit., p. 65.

87Ibid., p. 66.
88 This translation is an adaption of the Butcher translation.
92 Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.
94 See Aristotle’s definition of ἀμάρτημα in the discussion on moral error in Chapter 2, p. 59.
95 Cf. ἤλεος in quotations from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* above.
97 Moles notes that ἐπιεικὲς must mean "very good" in this passage of the *Poetics* (1452b34), even though this is not the normal or natural meaning of the word. This is because it is so clearly the opposite of the "very bad man", σφόδρα τονηρόν (1453a8-9), and the man between these extremes is fixed between opposites of distinguished ἀρετή and vice and depravity. The force of this word, he says, is fundamental.
98 Cf. *NE* III.4 1113a15ff for a discussion of σπουδαίος, the man of high moral standards.
103 Ibid., p. 390.
104 Rorty, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-68.
106 This argument and the quotations from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* are from Smithson, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.
Rorty *op. cit.*, p. 53, notes that this ode reveals the essence of Aristotelian tragedy.

This translation is my own.


This translation is my own.


Parry, *op. cit.*, p. 18.


I am referring to the last scene of the play when Agamemnon enters the city with Cassandra and meets with Clytaemestra. Succumbing to Clytaemestra's flattery, he is caught in her trap of death.


Cf. NE V.8 1135b11ff.


Sherman, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
126Ibid., pp. 98ff.


128Hudson, op. cit., p. 199. Hudson admits this is an adaptation from Kant. He has substituted 'virtue' for Kant's 'duty' in a well-known phrase from Kant's Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals.

129Ibid., p. 201.


131The word Aristotle uses in his ethics that is translated variously as "must" or "ought to be done," or "right" or "proper" or "appropriate to do" is often δεῖν. This word is the origin of "deontologic" and has the basic meaning of "to bind." It is interesting that this binding force of "ought" in Aristotle does not have the same force as that in deontologic moral theory, and that Aristotle's theory is not thought of as deontological. See also Owens, op. cit., pp. 263-264, 273-275.

132Much of this paragraph and the one immediately preceding suggested by Owens, op. cit., pp. 271-277.

133Kuhn, op. cit., p. 1. Much of this paragraph and the following two paragraphs are taken from Kuhn's article.

134Ibid., p. 2-3.

135Ibid., p. 3.

136Ibid., p. 3.

137Ibid., p. 3.


139Flanagan, op. cit., pp. 53-60.


143Lord Patrick Devlin, "Morals and the Criminal Law," Morality and the Law,
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------, Republic. trans. G.M.A. Grube.


