

CURABLE AND INCURABLE VICE IN ARISTOTLE

by

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Abstract:

In this thesis I provide an interpretation of Aristotle's account of moral vice and argue (1) that Aristotle's account is consistent, and (2) that Aristotle is not committed to the view that all vicious agents are incapable of improving their characters. The main argument attempts to show that a proper interpretation of Aristotle's account of vice must observe a distinction between what Aristotle recognizes as two distinct sorts of vicious agents: those who are capable of change, and those who are not. I argue that this distinction amounts to the same thing as what I call the distinction between curably and incurably vicious agents. Recognizing this distinction and drawing out the ideas which ground it, I argue, shows that Aristotle's account of vice is consistent, and that he is not committed to the view that all vicious agents are incapable of improving their characters.

Curable and Incurable Vice in Aristotle

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1. Introduction

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle has fairly little to say about vice. Worse, various things that he does say give rise to several puzzles, often leading interpreters to worry that Aristotle is committed to inconsistent claims and implausible theses. The most prominent case of alleged inconsistency regards Aristotle's description of the vicious agent. As many scholars have noticed, in two of his most explicit discussions on the topic - at *NE* VII and IX.4 - Aristotle provides characterizations of the vicious agent which seem to be straightforwardly inconsistent with one another. An importantly related point at which Aristotle seems to be committed to an implausible thesis regards his view about vicious character change. In several key passages, Aristotle seems to endorse the particularly strong thesis that character improvement is impossible for all vicious agents.

In this paper I will confront both of these issues. My discussion will center around two main questions. The first asks whether Aristotle's account of vice is consistent, and the second asks whether vicious agents are capable of improving their characters. These questions are, as I aim to show, intimately related. I will ultimately argue that a proper interpretation of Aristotle's account of vice must observe a distinction between what Aristotle recognizes as two distinct sorts of vicious agents: those who are capable of change, and those who are not. The latter sorts of vicious agents are those who Aristotle refers to as 'incurable' (*ἀνίατος*) in several key passages. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to the former sorts of vicious agents as 'curable,' I argue that his claims about such people make this an appropriate label. Thus, I argue that the distinction between vicious agents who are capable of change and those who are not amounts to the same thing as what I will call the distinction between curably and incurably vicious agents.

My main goals in this paper are to show that this distinction is crucial for understanding Aristotle's view of vice, and to demonstrate that recognizing this distinction shows - with regard

to the two main questions which I will attempt to answer - that Aristotle's account of vice is consistent, and that he is *not* committed to the view that all people of established vice cannot improve their characters.

In what follows, I will argue that incurably vicious agents are the standard sort of vicious agent for Aristotle, and that curably vicious agents are token exception cases which violate what is true of the standard type in several ways. Incurably vicious agents embody the features which Aristotle ascribes to the general character type 'vice.' One crucial feature of this state - understood as state of character directly contrary to virtue - is that it does not have internal to itself the source of its own change. As such, I argue that whether or not a given vicious agent can improve their character depends on whether or not they have available the external circumstances which make character change possible. This marks the *criteria* by which Aristotle distinguishes curably vicious agents as token exception cases to the standard type: whether or not the circumstances which make character change possible are available for any given vicious agent *determines* whether or not they are curable or incurable.

In addition to arguing for this as the criteria by which Aristotle distinguishes curably vicious agents from incurably vicious ones, I also argue that Aristotle takes the psychological phenomena of regret (and its absence) to play a key role as an *indicator* of curability and incurability. On my interpretation, curably vicious agents are regretful of both their actions and their character, while incurably vicious agents are regretful of neither their actions nor their character; and these taken to be indicators of each sort of agent's curability and incurability, respectively.

However, while the presence and absence of regret with respect to one's actions and one's character indicate curability and incurability, respectively, these are not their causes. Hence, I also provide an interpretation of Aristotle's view on what *causes* a given vicious agent to be either incurable or curable. My discussion on these points provides further insight into the nature of vice by looking at Aristotle's ideas about how it develops, and by showing what it would take for those who are in principle capable of change to actually do so.

2. That character improvement from vice is possible

One might object straightaway to my attempt at trying to show that Aristotle is committed in any way to the possibility of vicious character improvement by citing a familiar passage in *NE* III.5:

Again, it is unreasonable to think that someone who does unjust actions does not wish to be unjust, or that someone who does intemperate actions does not wish to be intemperate. If a person does what he knows will make him unjust, he will be unjust voluntarily. It does not follow, however, that, if he wishes, he will stop being unjust and be just. For neither does the ill person become well like this; but he is ill voluntarily, by living incontinently and disobeying his doctors, if that was what happened. At that time, it was open to him not to be ill, but it is no longer so once he has thrown away his chance... from the start it was open to the unjust person and the intemperate person not to become such, so that they are what they are voluntarily; but now that they have become what they are, it is no longer possible for them to be otherwise (1114a12-21).¹

This passage is standardly taken to support the idea that all vicious agents are incapable of character change. For example, W. D. Ross comments, “It was in the power of the vicious man not to become vicious; but it does not follow that he can now cease to be so.”² Sarah Broadie concurs: “By behaving in the ways that characterize a certain ethical bent, one comes to *be* of that ethical bent, and a point may be reached where it is too late to change... Aristotle speaks of someone wishing to cease to be unjust, when by now this is impossible.”³

I do not believe that this passage supports this sort of interpretation. Far from claiming that all vicious agents cannot improve, it is my view that the passage actually leaves open the possibility of character improvement from vice, and simply points to the idea that *wishing* for an improved character cannot on its own result in actual improvements. In the passage Aristotle claims that the voluntarily unjust and intemperate may *wish* for a better character, and that this

¹ All *NE* quotations are from Crisp (2014), and all *EE* quotations are from Inwood and Woolf (2013), with slight modifications. Quotations from other Aristotle texts are from Barnes (1984), with slight modifications. While Aristotle here singles out injustice and intemperance as salient examples of vice, there are several terms that he uses to refer to vicious people, often using them interchangeably. Common terms are the adjectives *κακος* and *φασλός*, and the corresponding nouns *κακία* and *φασλότης*. In other places, the adjective *μοχθηρός* and the noun *μοχθηρίαν*. I see no significant difference in the use of these terms.

² Ross (1953), p. 201. See also Glover (1970), p. 11-12 for a strong statement of this as Aristotle’s view.

³ Broadie (1991), p. 160-161. In a footnote, however, Broadie suggests that this passage implies only that vice “in general” is inescapable once acquired, and refers to *Cat* 13a23-31 for “more optimism about the possibility of reform” (p. 177n40). This passage will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

alone is causally insufficient for actually improving. But he does not make the stronger claim that any and all attempts at moral improvement from vice which go *beyond* mere wishing are doomed to fail.

In support of this idea - that at *NE* 1114a12-21 Aristotle is claiming that character change by wish alone is impossible, and nothing stronger - consider the comparison between the ill person and the unjust or intemperate person. The analogy is between a voluntarily ill person who actually *becomes* healthy and a voluntarily unjust or intemperate person who actually *becomes* just or temperate. Hence the claim that, just as the unjust person does not become just by wishing, “neither does the ill person *become well* like this” (1114a15-16). The claim here is not that the ill person can never recover their health. On the contrary, they can, but when this happens, it is not the result of wish alone. Once we notice that this is what the analogy entails, it would be quite strange to read the passage as suggesting that while the voluntarily ill can recover their health - but not by merely wishing - the voluntarily unjust or intemperate can never - neither by wishing nor by any other means - escape their vice.

But what of the claim, “but now that [the unjust and intemperate] have become [unjust and intemperate] it is no longer possible for them to be otherwise” (1114a21)? I suspect that the claim is not meant to apply to the entire future life of the currently unjust or intemperate. At the point when one comes to *be* vicious, they cannot at that time not *be* what they are. But this does not rule out the possibility of such a person *becoming* a better person at some future time. This interpretation is supported by the Greek. At *NE* 1114a21 Aristotle uses the negated infinitive μή εἶναι in claiming that it is not possible for the currently unjust and intemperate person “to be otherwise.” This parallels the negated infinitive μή νοσεῖν at *NE* 1114a18 where he claims that it is no longer open for a now-ill person “not to be ill.” Aristotle thus looks to be saying vicious people, like the ill, cannot *be* virtuous or healthy at a time when they are vicious and ill. But he is not also saying that the vicious and the ill can never make improvements in health and character in the future.⁴

Thus, I suggest that *NE* 1114a12-21 does not commit Aristotle to the view that all people of established vice can never improve their characters. All the passage claims is that such

⁴ Here I concur with Di Muzio’s (2000), p. 207-211 reading of this passage.

improvements *cannot* happen if all that occurs is that the agent in question wish they happen; and this leaves open the possibility of improvement in the case that something beyond mere wishing is involved. Indeed, in an often overlooked yet crucial passage in the *Categories*, Aristotle explicitly recognizes the possibility of vicious character improvement. At *Cat* 13a19-36 he remarks:

Further, with contraries it is possible (while the thing capable of receiving them is there) for change into one another to occur, unless the one belongs to something by nature as being hot does to fire. For it is possible for the healthy to fall sick and for the white to become black and the hot cold; and it is possible to become bad instead of good or good instead of bad (καὶ ἐκ σπουδαίου γε φαῦλον καὶ ἐκ φαύλου σπουδαῖον δυνατόν γενέσθαι). (For the bad man (φαῦλος), if led into better ways of living and talking, would progress, if only a little, towards being better. And if he once made even a little progress it is clear that he might either change completely or make really great progress. For however slight the progress he made to begin with, he becomes ever more easily changed toward virtue (ἀρετὴν), so that he is likely to make still more progress, and when this keeps happening it brings him over completely into the contrary state, provided time permits). With privation and possession, on the other hand, it is impossible for change into one another to occur. For change occurs from possession to privation but from privation to possession it is impossible; one who has gone blind does not recover his sight nor does a bald man regain his hair nor does a toothless man grow teeth.

The idea that character improvement from vice is possible is brought out here in a discussion that distinguishes two kinds of change: change between contraries and change between privation and possession. Change between contraries can progress toward or away from either respective contrary, provided that one of the contraries does not belong to the underlying subject in question by nature, as hotness does to fire. Unlike change between contraries, which is bi-directional, change between privation and possession is uni-directional. That is, it is only possible in the case that the thing undergoing change progresses from possession to privation.

The passage suggests that character change from bad to good - which Aristotle explicitly exemplifies here with case of a φαῦλος agent improving their character towards the “contrary state” (*Cat* 13a30-31) of virtue (ἀρετὴν) - is an example of change between contraries, on a par

with change from health to sickness, from white to black, and from hot to cold.⁵ Aristotle must think, then, that *in some cases* vicious people can improve their characters, and sometimes their improvement progresses all the way to the state of virtue. Thus, the two main passages discussed so far are consistent with one another: whereas *NE* 1114a12-21 leaves open the possibility of character change from vice and explains the causal inefficacy of mere wishing, *Cat* 13a19-36 makes explicit the point that character change from vice is a kind of change that is possible.

3. What makes character improvement from vice possible, and when this is impossible

In the previous section I argued against the interpretation of Aristotle according to which all vicious agents are incapable of character change. My positive suggestion was that Aristotle does in fact think that character change from vice is possible; however, I claimed this to be so only ‘in some cases.’ The qualification is necessary because, as I will now argue, for some vicious agents character improvement is in fact *not* possible. Here we are faced with a puzzle. In the passage I’ve just cited (*Cat* 13a19-36), Aristotle seemed to be saying the following: since change between contraries is a kind of change that is possible, given that vice and virtue are contraries, it follows that character change from vice to virtue is a kind of change that is possible. But how can this be the true if it is also the case, as I am now suggesting, that for some vicious agents character change is *impossible*?⁶

The answer, I think, is that although character change away from vice and in the direction of virtue is a kind of change that is possible, it is not a kind of change that is *always* possible; and a similar thing can be said of the other pairs of contraries that Aristotle discusses at *Cat* 13a19-36. But *why* should this be so? To answer this question, we need more information about Aristotle’s claim about the possibility of change between contraries. In particular, we need to

⁵ Aristotle consistently maintains that vice is to be conceptualized as the contrary of virtue. See *Cat* 6b15-16, 10b12-13, 10b18-21, 13b36-14a2, 14a19-25, *Top* 113b27-31, *EE* 1228a23-25, 1234a24-25, *NE* 1130a9-11, and 1145a15-17.

⁶ To be sure, in what follows, I am not arguing that sometimes moral improvement from vice fails to progress all the way to virtue. I take this as a given. Rather, I will be arguing for the stronger claim that for some vicious agents, there is no possibility of character improvement whatsoever. I will ultimately argue in section 6, however, that such people are quite rare.

know what makes the claim true, and why, as I have just suggested, we should think that its truth can vary between cases where the contraries are in question are the same. These are questions that are crucial for understanding when moral improvement away from vice is and is not possible. But since Aristotle does not directly address them, we need to extract an explanation on his behalf. There seem to be two possible ways of answering these questions.

One option is to claim that what makes change between contraries possible is some feature internal to each respective contrary in a given pair. On this interpretation, change to a contrary is possible because the source of the change is a feature *internal* to the contrary itself. If this is what makes change between contraries possible, then these changes will be possible in every case where the same contraries are in question. For if the source of change to a contrary is a feature of the contrary itself, then nothing external to it can impede its possibility of changing. For example, if the source of change to coldness from hotness is something internal to hotness, then it will be true that hotness will always be capable of becoming cold, irrespective of any particular external circumstances. Nothing can prevent hotness from becoming cold if hotness has internal to itself the source of its own change to coldness.

On the other hand, it could be that what makes change between contraries possible is *not* some feature internal to each respective contrary in a given pair, but rather is something *external* to them. On this interpretation, change to a contrary is possible because the source of the change is something external to each respective contrary in a given pair. If this turns out to be what makes change between contraries possible, then these changes may not be possible in every case where the relevant contraries are the same. For example, if certain external circumstances must be in place for a change between a particular pair of contraries to be possible, then *absent* these circumstances being in place, the change will *not* be possible. To use the same example as before, if the source of change to coldness from hotness is something *not* internal to hotness, but rather is a matter of certain external circumstances being in place, then depending on whether or not these circumstances are in fact in place or not, the change may or may not turn out to be possible. Something external to hotness - for example, environmental considerations - can prevent it from changing to coldness if hotness does not have internal to itself the source of its own change to coldness.

I think that this second sort of interpretation is the correct way to fill out Aristotle's conceptualization of change between contraries at *Cat* 13a19-36. Only on this sort of interpretation can we make sense of how the examples of changes between contraries he provides in the passage are supposed to work. However, this interpretive choice requires some explanation.

In the passage, Aristotle picks out four pairs of contraries to illustrate his point about the possibility of change between contraries: health and sickness, white and black, hot and cold, and good and bad. This last example - which is elaborated with the case of a φαῦλος agent improving their character towards virtue (ἀρετήν) - is the most important example for present purposes, and it is the only example that Aristotle discusses at length. But before discussing that example, first consider how Aristotle's example of a change from sickness to health can be said to work on my proposed interpretation. When a person who is sick makes progress towards becoming healthy, what do we say about how this is possible? In addition, do we think that such a change is possible in all relevantly similar cases?

With regard to the first question, presumably we would not say that something internal to the condition of being sick is what makes it possible for a sick person to improve their health. Rather, we would say that this is made possible by something external to the condition itself. Perhaps this externality takes the form of the sick person's having access to an effective medication, or having a well-functioning immune system which is able to combat the sickness. Whatever the case may be, when someone who is sick makes improvements towards becoming healthy, this improvement isn't made possible by some feature internal to the condition of being sick, but rather it is made possible by something external to that condition. The answer to the second question builds on the answer to the first. Since change from sickness to health is made possible by something external to the condition itself, if whatever relevant externality that is necessary for the change to be possible is *not* available in any one particular case - i.e. effective medication is not available, or one's immune system is impaired in such a way that renders it incapable of combatting sickness - then it is not possible for *that* sick person to improve their health. Thus, in relevantly similar cases of sickness, sometimes a change from sickness to health is possible, and sometimes it is not. Whether or not it will be possible depends on the availability

of the relevant externality that makes such a change possible, for sickness does not have internal to itself the source of its own change to health.

When we apply this conceptualization to the moral example of a vicious agent improving their character, we get the following picture: vice - conceived of as a distinct character type contrary to virtue - does not have internal to itself the source of its own change to its contrary. But this does not mean that character change from vice is never possible. All this means is that if we are to say that such a change is possible in any one particular case, we cannot explain why this is so by reference to some feature internal to the state of character itself. Rather, we must explain this by reference to something external to it. Furthermore, if the relevant external consideration that makes character change from vice possible can be identified, if this turns out to be something that is not available for any one vicious agent, then it follows that *they* will not be able to improve their character. For since vice cannot change itself - but instead requires the availability of certain external considerations - then if these are not available, change will simply not be possible.

The question that immediately arises here is what the relevant external consideration(s) which make character change from vice possible could be. Fortunately, the example of moral improvement from vice is the example which Aristotle has the most to say about at *Cat* 13a19-36. The crucial part of the passage is where Aristotle claims that the vicious agent's improvement can happen if they are "led into better ways of living and talking" (*Cat* 13a24-25). It is unclear what exactly this amounts to in practice, and I will turn to this point in section 6. What must be stressed presently, however, is that this looks to be the key sort of circumstance which must be available for vicious character change to be possible. That is, when the circumstances according to which any one vicious agent can be "led into better ways of living and talking" (*Cat* 13a24-25) are available - whatever this turns out to mean in practice - then *that* person is capable of change. On the other hand, if for any one vicious agent these circumstances are *not* available, we must say of them that character improvement is not possible.

I take this conceptualization to lay the groundwork for a key distinction - to be filled out in detail in the remainder of this paper - between what Aristotle recognizes as two distinct sorts of vicious agents: those who are capable of improving their characters and those who are not.

The distinction turns on whether or not certain circumstances which make the change possible are available for any given vicious agent. The availability of these circumstances are thus the *criteria* for making the distinction. If these circumstances are available, then the vicious agent in question can change, but if they are not, then they cannot. Thus, the distinction is type/token, not type/type. For insofar as a person is vicious, they cannot change, because vice does not have internal to itself the source of its own change. But insofar as they have available certain circumstances which make character change possible - circumstances which are external to their state - then they *can* change. Hence, these latter sorts of people are token exceptional cases of vice, they are not a different type of character.

Furthermore, to be clear: to recognize the existence of a sort of vicious agent for whom character change is possible is not *itself* a recognition of a sort of vicious agent who *does* improve their character. For the circumstances which make character change possible need to take effect for the change to actually happen. Still, the availability of these circumstances is nonetheless necessary for such a change to even be conceptualized as possible in the first place.

Before getting on to a discussion of what this key idea of being “led into better ways of living and talking” (*Cat* 13a24-25) amounts to, and what Aristotle has to say about the sorts of people to whom it applies, it is first necessary to take a closer look at some features of the general character type ‘vice.’ Thus far I have referred to this as the state of character contrary to virtue, and explained that it does not have internal to itself the source change to its contrary. In light of these points, I then suggested that those vicious agents who *are* capable of change are such because of certain circumstances, not because of some feature internal to their state. These agents are thus token exceptional cases who violate what is true of the general type with regard to the possibility of change.

I think that there are further ways in which these token exceptional sorts of vicious agents - vicious agents who are capable of improving their characters - violate what is true of the general type. I will discuss some of these differences in detail in section 7, but in order to fully appreciate these, we first need to know more about what Aristotle takes to be true of the general type. This is the task I will undertake in the next section. I will do this by turning to several key passages in *NE* VII. Throughout the book Aristotle makes several brief but crucial remarks about

vice in an extended contrast between intemperance and incontinence. The claim which will be the main focus of my discussion here is Aristotle's claim that the vicious agent is 'incurable' (ἀνίατος).

4. Vice as 'incurable' (ἀνίατος), and regret as an indicator of incurability⁷

In *NE VII*, Aristotle begins by distinguishing six distinct type of character, conceived of as three pairs of contraries:

there are three types of character to be avoided, namely, vice, incontinence and brutishness. The contraries of two of these are clear; we call one virtue and the other continence. What is contrary to brutishness might most appropriately be called superhuman virtue (1145a15-19).

In addition to the opening claim of *NE VII* that the ensuing discussion is about distinct character *types*, Aristotle's actual claims about vice in the book do in fact look to be claims about the character type in general, and not about particular token vicious agents in unique circumstances. That is, Aristotle here seems to be concerned to point out distinctive features of particular character types, not to answer questions about individual agents in specific situations. As such, absent explicit textual evidence to the contrary, I take Aristotle's claims about vice here to be claims about what is true of the general character type 'vice,' irrespective of any external considerations. That is, I take Aristotle's characterization of vice in *NE VII* to be a

⁷ Many of Aristotle's comments about vice in *NE VII* are put as claims about intemperance. This is largely in order to distinguish incontinence from intemperance, since they are concerned with the same things. And in the *NE* generally, Aristotle sometimes adopts the practice of using general 'vice' terms (μοχθηρία, φαυλότης, κακία, and πονηρία) and 'intemperance' (ἀκολασία) interchangeably. In this section I will be discussing important passages in which Aristotle is discussing vice, and in several of these Aristotle is clearly picking out the vice of intemperance. Since my aim is to provide an interpretation of Aristotle's account of vice generally, a worry that arises here is that Aristotle's claims about intemperance may not always be unproblematically regarded as claims about vice more generally. While I do not want to suggest that *all* of Aristotle's claims about intemperance can be taken as claims about vice generally, I do think that the key conceptual points which I discuss in this section can be viewed in this way. I think that part of the reason why Aristotle often chooses to talk about vice in several places by referring specifically to intemperance is because he views intemperance as a paradigm vice. This is a fairly uncontroversial position. As some recent commentators have put it, intemperance is "the vice Aristotle clearly considers to be the most pernicious of all the character defects" (Brickhouse (2003), p. 3, n. 1); it is "vice *par excellence*" (Nielsen (2017), p. 2.). Thus, I take it that the passages which I am concerned with in this section - even those which explicitly single out intemperance - can be applied to an interpretation of Aristotle's account more generally, though I am aware that all of Aristotle's claims about intemperance should not be viewed in this way.

characterization of the character type *before* we consider whether any particular vicious agent has available the circumstances under which they might improve, namely, the circumstances in which they can be “led into better ways of living and talking” (*Cat* 13a24-25).

The main claim which I will focus on here is Aristotle’s claim that the vicious agent is ‘incurable’ (ἀνίατος). I take this claim to be an explicit formulation of the idea latent in Aristotle’s discussion about the possibility of character change from vice at *Cat* 13a19-36. Specifically, I take it to be an explicit formulation of the idea that the general character type ‘vice’ - the state of character contrary to virtue - does not have internal to itself the source of its own change. To be standardly vicious - that is, to embody the features of the general character type ‘vice’ - is to be incurably vicious, and incurability implies the impossibility of change. But of course, since I take Aristotle here to be discussing what is true of the standard character type ‘vice,’ given that what is true of the type can turn out to be false for any particular token case as a result of external circumstances, this does not mean that character change is all-things-considered impossible for all vicious agents. All this means is that if we are to say of any particular vicious agent that character change is possible, we will need to explain this in terms of their having available certain circumstances, not in terms of their state, for the *source* of character change from vice is not a feature of the state itself. Vicious agents are incurable insofar as they are vicious.⁸

At *NE* 1150a21-22 Aristotle claims that the intemperate person (ἀκόλαστος) “is bound to be without regrets (μὴ εἶναι μεταμελητικόν), and thus incurable (ἀνίατος), since anyone without regrets is incurable (ἀμεταμέλητος ἀνίατος).” The intemperate is claimed to be incurable on the grounds that they have no regrets, and people who have no regrets cannot be cured. What exactly is it that the type of character described here does not regret? Particular actions? The content of their character? Context would seem to suggest that it is the former. As noted, the passage is located in the context of an ongoing contrast between intemperance and incontinence. The

⁸ The interpretation that to be ‘incurable’ implies the impossibility of change has recently been challenged by Di Muzio (2000). On his view, the notion of incurability implies the impossibility of change only as a result of external influences, and this leaves open the possibility of change “if the process of change has an internal origin” (p. 212). My view is quite the opposite: incurability implies the impossibility of change ‘internally,’ or as a matter of the state itself. The only way in which a standard, ‘incurable’ vicious agent can change is if they have available certain external circumstances which make such a change possible. On my view, it is impossible for the process of vicious character change to originate internally.

former acts from decision (προαίρεσις), and so does not regret what they do, while the latter abandons their decision when they are overwhelmed by passion, and so end up regretting what they do (1146b18-23, 1148a14-19, 1150a17-22, 1150b29-1151a11). Thus, in contrast with the incontinent, the intemperate is taken to have no regrets with respect to their actions.

Is the intemperate agent's lack of regret, then, only manifested at the level of particular actions? I think that it is not. Just a few lines down, Aristotle claims that the "vice is unaware of itself, [while] incontinence is not (κακία λανθάνει, ἢ δ' ἀκρασία οὐ λανθάνει)" (1150b36). This is quick, and Aristotle does not elaborate on the idea, but I take his point to be this: a feature of incontinence, conceived of as a distinct type of moral state, is that it is aware of itself. By contrast, a feature of vice, also a distinct type of moral state, is that it is unaware of itself. Put in terms of actual persons: incontinent agents are aware that they are incontinent, but vicious agents are not aware that they are vicious.

If this is right, then in seeking to identify precisely what it is that the vicious agent does not have regrets about, the key question that arises here is this: is it possible for one to regret having a certain type of character if they are unaware that they do in fact have that sort of character? I think that they cannot. I take it that one must be in some sense aware of what type of person they are in order to be able to regret being that type of person. Since self-awareness is not a feature of the general character type 'vice,' then vicious agents who are vicious in the standard way must be blocked off from being able to regret the content of their character. Accordingly, I suggest that the lack of regret which is manifest in agents who embody the features of the general character type 'vice' is two-fold: in addition to not regretting their actions, they also do not regret their character. Their lack of regret with regard to particular actions is explained by the fact that they act from decision, and their lack of regret with regard to their character is explained by the fact that they are unaware that they are actually vicious.

So, the psychological phenomena of regret - in particular, its absence - is a key feature of the general character type 'vice.' For if any one vicious agent is unregretful in the aforementioned ways, this should be taken to be an indicator of their incurability. This idea is affirmed at *NE* 1150b29-35:

The intemperate person (ἀκόλαστος), as was said, is not the sort to have regrets (μεταμελητικός); since he stands by his decision. But every incontinent person is the sort to have regrets...the intemperate person is incurable (ἀνίατος), while the incontinent is curable. Wickedness (μοχθηρία) is a chronically bad condition, and thus like a disease such as dropsy or consumption, while incontinence is not chronic, and thus like epilepsy.

Though the distinction between curable and incurable badness is spelled out narrowly here in terms of the distinction between incontinence and intemperance, we can abstract away from the immediate context to show how Aristotle's idea that lack of indicates incurability can be used to do two crucial things: (1) make a first step towards identifying potential non-intemperate incurably vicious agents, and (2) distinguish them from what I will argue Aristotle recognizes as a different sort of vicious agent, namely, a 'curably' vicious agent: one for whom character improvement is possible. For once we notice that lacking regrets with respect to one's actions and character is taken to indicate incurability, we can suppose that if there exist other vicious agents (cowardly agents, unjust agents, and so on) who are unregretful of their vice in the same way that the intemperate person is claimed to be, then these people - like the intemperate who Aristotle has explicitly singled out - would seem to also fit the psychological picture of an incurably vicious agent. But of course, to make a proper judgement about whether any given vicious agent is in fact incurable will require we look beyond the features of their state and to the formal criteria for making such judgments. Still, looking at whether a given vicious agent is unregretful of their vice seems a promising first step in making such determinations.

In addition, with the point that lack of regret indicates incurability at hand, we can also suppose that if there exists a sort of vicious agent who *does* regret their vice - where this includes regret with respect to their actions and regret with respect to their character - this would be a significant consideration in favor of the thought that such a person might be curably vicious. But again, if such people exist, if we are to say of them that they can improve - hence being 'curable' in the sense directly opposed to the notion of being 'incurable' - we will need to look beyond the

features of their state and to their circumstances, for it is the availability of certain circumstances that make character change possible for any given vicious agent.⁹

5. The cause of incurability as a corrupted ἀρχή

Suppose that what I have argued thus far is correct: the standard type of vicious agent - those who embody the features that Aristotle ascribes to the general character type ‘vice’ in *NE VII* - do not regret their actions nor their character, and this indicates their incurability. Only if they have available certain circumstances which make vicious character change possible should we reverse this judgment about their incurability. Here arises the question: what *makes* this the case? That is, if regret indicates incurability, and the absence of certain circumstances which make moral reform possible formally determine it, it is still unclear about what the *cause* of incurability is. How do people become incurably vicious?

The answer, I think, lies in Aristotle’s claims that vicious agents are unable to recognize the correct conception of the good, and this is the result of bad habituation with regard to pleasures and pains. That this is Aristotle’s view can be shown by citation a few important passages. At *NE 1140b15-19* Aristotle explains that the principle of action “consists in the goal it seeks” (1140b16), namely, the end at which they aim. Virtuous people are able to recognize the correct conception of the good. As Aristotle puts it, “they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for people in general” (1140b8-9), and virtue is a state that “preserves” (1140b12) an agent’s correct view about what is good. Aristotle continues: “But if a person has been ruined by pleasure or pain, it follows that the first principle (ἀρχή) will not be evident to him, nor the fact that this ought to be the goal and cause of everything he chooses and does; for vice tends to corrupt the first principle (κακία φθαρτικὴ ἀρχῆς)” (1140b16-20).

⁹ At *NE 1121b12-14* Aristotle claims that stinginess is incurable, but he does not say that stingy people have no regrets. He says that the vice is incurable because, “it seems to be caused by old age and every sort of disability.” So this is one case of incurability that is not indicated by the lack of regret. Presumably vices that arise at the latter stages of life - as Aristotle claims stinginess does here - can be viewed as incurable because the sorts of people who embody them simply do not have enough time left in which they could actually make improvements to their character, regardless of whether they have available the sorts of circumstances which make character change possible.

This idea is repeated in similar language at *NE* 1144a31-36: “practical syllogisms have a first principle (ἀρχήν): ‘since such-and-such is the end or the chief good,’ whatever it is (let it be anything you like for the sake of argument). And this is evident to the good person alone, since wickedness (μοχθηρία) distorts our vision and thoroughly deceives us about the first principles (ἀρχάς) of action.” So too at *NE* 1151a15-17: “Virtue preserves the first principle, while wickedness corrupts it (ἡ γὰρ ἀρετὴ καὶ μοχθηρία τὴν ἀρχὴν ἣ μὲν φθείρει ἣ δὲ σώζει), and in actions the end for the sake of which we act is the first principle (ἀρχή).”

To be sure, the ἀρχή in question here which Aristotle claims that the vicious agent fails to recognize - and so fails to set as their end for the sake of which they decide and act - is not just *a* conception of the good, but it is the *correct* one.¹⁰ Vicious people are not altogether unprincipled: they act on the basis of what they take to be good, and this is encapsulated in their decision (προαίρεσις).¹¹ But their conception of the good is of course incorrect, and *NE* 1140b16-20 makes it clear that cause of *this* is bad habituation in pleasures and pains (see also 1113a29-35). That is, the vicious agent’s bad habits with regard to pleasures and pains have corrupted them in such a way that they are incapable of recognizing what is *really* good: they fail to discern the ἀρχή which they ought; the ἀρχή that an agent would be able to recognize if they had good habits in pleasures and pains. As Amélie Rorty puts the point: the vicious person “has ends - he is the sort of person who can act in light of his ends - but he has the wrong ends...[he] is misled by pleasure, because he does not know what is good.”¹² This sort of interpretation also makes sense of why elsewhere Aristotle says that the vicious person is “ignorant of what he should do and refrain from doing” (1110b28-29). Their ignorance is “of the universal” (1110b32), namely, ignorance of the correct conception of the good (see also 1147a25-32, *Mot An* 701a9-23).

¹⁰ The ἀρχή that is preserved by virtue is also preserved by incontinence (1151a24-25). Both sorts of agents have the correct conception of the good. The difference is that the virtuous person acts in accordance with this conception in acting virtuously, but the incontinent abandons it in acting incontinently.

¹¹ Here I disagree with Müller (2015), who argues that Aristotle’s vicious person is wholly unprincipled. For a thorough criticism of this view, see Nielsen (2017), p. 19-22.

¹² Rorty (1980), p. 271-272. For various suggestions that in the passages I have cited Aristotle’s point is that vicious people are unable to recognize the correct conception of the good, see Grant (1885), Vol. 2, p. 160 and 225, Stewart (1892), Vol. 2, p. 199, Rackham (1934), p. 338, Ross (1953), p. 225, Joachim (1955), p. 211, 232, Irwin (1985), p. 342, and Nielsen (2017), p. 14-15.

These points piece together the following picture: habituation in pleasures and pains has a significant impact on an agent's moral development. As Aristotle puts it in an earlier book, "It is because of pleasures and pains that people become bad — through pursuing or avoiding the wrong ones, or at the wrong time, or in the wrong manner, or in any of the other various ways distinguished by reason" (1104b20-24, cf. 1109b4-5). If one has bad habits in pleasure and pains, they not only set themselves up to eventually have an incorrect conception of the good, but they also run the risk of losing the ability of ever recognizing what is *truly* good. As H. H. Joachim puts it, such a person may come to have a "thoroughly perverted view of life."¹³ But since they cannot even see the good as good, having no real idea "of what is noble and truly pleasant" (1179b15-16), they are wholly content with that view, showing no regrets about who they are or what they do. Insofar as a person is vicious, then, they are incurable, and the cause of their incurability is a corrupted ἀρχή: a corrupted conception of the good. This corruption renders the vicious agent as incapable of recognizing what is really good, and the corruption itself is the result of bad habits with regard to pleasures and pains.

6. The rarity of incurably vicious agents

However, it is my view that incurability is not the inevitable result, or even the most likely result, for all vicious agents. Since whether or not a given vicious agent is incurable turns on whether or not they have available the circumstances which make character change possible - the circumstances according to which they can be "led into better ways of living and talking" (*Cat* 13a24-25) - incurably vicious agents are only as common as these circumstances are rare. How rare are these circumstances? In order to see answer this, we first need to get an idea of what these circumstances are. What might Aristotle have in mind when he claims that the vicious agent can improve if they are "led into better ways of living and talking" (*Cat* 13a24-25)?

I think we can get an idea of what it means from several passages where Aristotle speaks of the reformatory power of punishment (κόλασις). In certain passages Aristotle speaks of punishment being forward-looking, concerned with *improving* the agent in question. For

¹³ Joachim (1955), p. 232.

example, at *Rhetoric* 1369b13-14 he says that “punishment is inflicted for the sake of the person punished,” and in the *NE* he explicitly refers to punishment (κολάσεις) as “a kind of cure” (1104b17), which operates on the level pleasure and pain. So too at *EE* 1220a34-39 he claims that “virtue and vice are concerned with pleasures and pains...it is through these that punishment (κολάσεις) works, being a form of cure that is (as in other cases) effected through opposites.”¹⁴

Accordingly, I suggest that when Aristotle says that a vicious person can improve their character if they are “led into better ways of living and talking” (*Cat* 13a24-25) - thus violating what is true of their general character type with regard to the possibility of change and rendering them ‘curable’ in the formal sense - he must have in mind exposure to some form(s) of punishment. When effective punishment is available, then like the sick person who is possession of an effective medication is capable of improving their health, the vicious agent is capable of improving their character. However, just as the sick person will not actually improve unless they actually take the medication, the vicious agent will not actually improve unless the relevant punishment(s) are actually administered. How can effective punishments, when they available, positively impact the vicious?

Given what I have argued for as the cause of incurability - a corrupted ἀρχή whose corruption is due to bad habits with regard to pleasures and pains - if these corrective punishments are to contribute to the improvement of the vicious, they must start from the bottom up, so to speak, aiming first to re-habituate their pleasures and pains. This process will have the goal of making the agent in question come to see, and eventually reflectively endorse and act on, the correct conception of the good. In the broad sense, these punishments will aim to habituate the vicious agent in such a way that helps them see that it is a good thing to not pursue some particular pleasure or avoid some particular pain (against their prior bad habits) when doing so would be contrary to the correct conception of the good. But the particular forms this can take in actual situations are many. For example, I take it that this can involve limiting the resources that one has available for performing certain sorts of actions, restricting their access to certain

¹⁴ See also *EE* 1214b29-35 where Aristotle claims that the sick and the insane, though they have wrong views of the good, may eventually change their views with the appropriate sort of corrective treatment.

environments, disallowing them from associating with certain people or groups, or simply communicating one's dissatisfaction with what the vicious agent has done. The details will depend on the circumstances of the individual, but so long as they aim to re-habituate one's bad habits with regard to pleasures and pains by restraining, restricting, tempering, or disciplining them, they would seem to count as a form of punishment.

This, I think, is what Aristotle must have in mind when he refers to the circumstances according to which a vicious agent can be “led into better ways of living and talking” (*Cat* 13a24-25). Now that we have an idea of what these crucial circumstances that make vicious character change possible amount to in practice, we can now ask how common or uncommon they are. How hard are practices of punishment to come by? It seems to me that the *complete absence* of such practices in any given society would be quite uncommon. Although in some passages Aristotle does not seem to think that many cities do very well to promote virtue and discourage vice by means of habituation in pleasure and pains, citing Sparta at one point as an exception (1180a25-29), this does not imply that such practices do not exist at all, for us nor for him. At one point he takes it as a given that such practices exist: “legislators...punish and penalize anyone who does wicked things...and they reward anyone who does noble things, as if encouraging the one while deterring the other” (1113b23-26). For the most part and in most societies, vicious people are not usually ignored, and vicious actions - insofar as they capture the notice of others - do not usually go unpunished.¹⁵ And after all, Aristotle does think that the goal of the true legislator is to promote virtue and discourage vice at both the level of the individual and society. He claims that they should “urge people to virtue and encourage them to act for the

¹⁵ To be sure, though, it is likely that some vices are more susceptible to escape the notice of others than others. For example, it's hard to think that one could go performing cowardly actions for very long without anyone ever noticing. But some vices like greed and selfishness might do well at escaping the notice of others. This is not a problem for my view, however, for I take it to be true that most societies do have norms and practices which discourage greed and selfishness and encourage things like generosity and caring for others. It might just turn out that although various moral vices can in principle be ‘cured’ in one way or another, certain vices are simply harder to notice, and so harder to treat by means of punishment.

sake of the noble... but ought also to impose punishments and penalties (κολάσεις τε και τιμωρίας) on those who disobey” (1180a6-9).¹⁶

But even at the level of small groups or friends, Aristotle seems to think that when people can do something to try to reform the vicious, they should. For example, at *NE* 1165b13-22, Aristotle wonders whether a person of good character should break off a friendship if their friend becomes bad. He replies, “If they can be reformed, we should save their character more than their property, in so far as character is better and more a part of friendship” (1165b19-22). However, though Aristotle seems fairly optimistic here, attempting to reform a friend on one’s own would be quite difficult, for Aristotle also believes that the command of a single person “has no strength or compulsive power... And people hate a human being who stands in opposition to their impulses, even if he is right to do so; but there is no oppressiveness in the law’s prescribing what is good” (1180a19-24). As such, “The best thing, then, is for there to be correct public concern with such things” (1180a30-31); “a person who wishes to improve people, whether many or few...should try to develop a capacity for legislating” (1180b24-26).

All of this leads me to believe that although incurably vicious agents are the standard type of vicious agent for Aristotle, in reality, few actually exist. This is because I take it that the complete absence of punishing practices for vicious actions in any given society are extremely uncommon, and such a complete absence is what would be necessary for us to acknowledge the existence of a bona fide incurably vicious agent. For if there are any punishing practices available for any given vicious agent in the real world, regardless of whether they ever actually improve their character as a result of these punishments, we cannot say of them that they are in fact incurable.

A comparison to virtue, I think, can help draw out the idea of how rare incurably vicious agents are. Recall that Aristotle thinks that vice and virtue are contraries, and I have argued that incurable vice is the standard character type for Aristotle. So the incurably vicious agent corresponds with what we might call a ‘incorruptibly virtuous’ person. This is the sort of person

¹⁶ Although I cannot pursue a discussion here, given that Aristotle thinks that making people good is, at least in the ideal case, the proper aim of legislation, it is plausible to think the administration of improvement-oriented punishments will be a task for the laws (see 1099b30-32, 1102a7-10, 1103b2-6, 1109b30-35, 1113b22-26, 1129b19-26, 1179b31-1180a5, 1180b24-29). For discussion of how Aristotle envisages the laws as promoting virtue, see Kamtekar (2014).

who, like the incurably vicious, cannot change their character as a matter of their state: like vice, virtue does not have internal to itself the source of its own change. So, if we are to say that it is possible for the character of an incorruptibly virtuous person to decline, we must explain why this is so by reference to certain circumstances external to their state which make such a decline possible. We might usefully think of these circumstances as those in which a virtuous person can be ‘dragged into worse ways of living and talking.’

But incorruptibly virtuous people are of course extremely rare in real life, and given the framework that I have presented thus far, this must be so because to recognize the existence of an incorruptibly virtuous person would require that there exists a society where there are *no* opportunities in which a virtuous person might be led to decline; and I take it that such societies are extremely rare, if existent at all. As Daniel Russell puts the point about the rarity of the virtuous person: “no real person is or even could be perfect even in one virtue, let alone in the virtues, in the plural.”¹⁷ Thus, in Julia Annas’ words, Aristotle’s virtuous person - the incorruptibly virtuous person, on my view - is often regarded as “a normative ideal even if never met with in real life.”¹⁸ By contrast, Aristotle’s incurably vicious person, I think, can be usefully viewed in a similar way, as a sort of negative ideal which may never be met with in real life.

With respect to virtue, this leaves us with the implication that most virtuous people in the real world are corruptible. But this of course does not mean that they *will be corrupted*. All it means is that since societies in general seem to have opportunities for non-virtuous thought and behavior, it is almost always possible for virtuous people to decline in character. But on the other side of the coin, with respect to vice, we are left with a question: does Aristotle actually think that curably vicious agents exist? That is, aside from what Aristotle’s claim about change between contraries implies with regard to the possibility moral reform for vicious agents, does Aristotle *explicitly* recognize the existence of a sort of vicious agent who has available the circumstances according to which they can be “led into better ways of living and talking” (*Cat* 13a24-25)? In the next section, I will argue that in an important passage at *NE* IX.4 Aristotle does explicitly recognize the existence of what I have referred to thus far as a curably vicious

¹⁷ Russell (2009), p. 130.

¹⁸ Annas (1993), p. 83

agent. In what follows, I will discuss the passage, explain that such an agent does have regrets about their actions and their character - hence indicating their curability - and demonstrate why this need not be viewed as a contradiction with what Aristotle claims at *NE* 1150a21-22 and 1150b29-35.

7. Aristotle's curably vicious agent: *NE IX.4*

The key passage which will be the subject of discussion in this section is *NE* 1166b4-30. The context is this: having argued that the characteristics of friendship found between good people are also found "in the good person's relation to himself" (1166a10-11), Aristotle then wonders if a similar thing can be said of bad people. Specifically, he wonders whether bad people can be friends with themselves. His answer is no, emphatically:

no one who is altogether bad and wicked (φαύλων καὶ ἀνοσιουργῶν) has [the characteristics of friendship to themselves], or even appears to. Indeed, even bad people (φαύλοις) scarcely have them, since they are in internal conflict...And those who have committed many dreadful crimes and are despised for their wickedness (μοχθηρίαν) run away from their lives and destroy themselves. And wicked people (μοχθηροί) seek others with whom to spend their days, and they avoid themselves. For when they are by themselves they remember many disturbing actions and foresee others like them, whereas when they are with others they forget. Because they have no qualities worthy of love, they feel no relation of friendship to themselves...their soul is in a state of civil strife, and one element in it, because of its wickedness (μοχθηρίαν), grieves in abstaining from certain things, while the other element is pleased; the one draws them this way, the other that, as if tearing them apart. If a person cannot be pained and pleased at the same time, nevertheless after a short time he is pained because he was pleased, and he wishes these things had not become pleasant for him; for bad people (φαῦλοι) are full of regret (μεταμελείας). The bad person (φαῦλος), then, appears not to be disposed in a friendly way even to himself, because he has nothing worthy of love. If to be like this is the height of wretchedness (μοχθηρίαν), we ought to avoid wickedness (μοχθηρίαν) with all our might and try to be good; for this is how one can have a relation of friendship with oneself, and become a friend to another (1166b5-30).

There is a lot to unpack from this passage. Since I have argued that the presence of regret can only indicate curability, and that if we are to say of any given vicious agent that improvement is

possible we need look to their circumstances, I'll start by explaining why I take Aristotle here to be describing a vicious agent who has available the circumstances according to which they can be "led into better ways of living and talking" (*Cat* 13a24-25); namely, the circumstances under which they can be punished for their vice.

The key claim I cite in favor of this interpretation is that which Aristotle makes at 1166b13-14. There he claims that, "those who have committed many dreadful crimes and are despised for their wickedness (*μοχθηρίων*) run away from their lives and destroy themselves." As I have argued, one particular form that punishment can take is when one person or several people confront another person in order to communicate their dissatisfaction with what they have done. I think that this is the sort of thing that Aristotle is suggesting in this part of the passage. The sort of person Aristotle is describing here is a person whose vice has not gone unnoticed. They know what other people think of them and they know how they've affected them with their "many dreadful crimes" (1166b13): they are hated. So not only do they have available the circumstances which make character change possible - namely, circumstances under which they can be punished for their vice - but they also seem to have *already been* punished. People have made the vicious agent aware of their discontent with their actions.

The vicious person's initial response to punishment - which here takes the form of others making their dissatisfaction with what the agent has done clear - is aversion. These circumstances enable a sort of self-awareness (the sort of awareness which incurably vicious agents lack); and what they become aware of is not pleasant. They are haunted by the remembrance of past actions and the anticipation of future ones (1166b15-16), and they run away from themselves (1166b15). They are in some sense aware that if they were to take the time to reflect on themselves there would be terrible things that they would have to confront, and so they avoid reflection, but cannot ever quite seem to escape themselves. They know what they have done and the harms they have caused, but they are steadfastly avoiding working through the implications of these. In a sense they almost cannot afford to reflect, for it is possible that their distress may actually lead them to commit suicide (1166b13-14). Such agents resemble the sort of person vividly characterized in a passage from Lucretius:

People evidently are aware that their minds are carrying a heavy load, which wears them with its weight...ignorant of what they want for themselves, and continually impatient to move somewhere else as if the change could relieve them of their burden... [they] endeavor to run away from themselves; but since they are of course unable to make good their escape, they remain firmly attached to themselves against their will, and hate themselves because they are sick...¹⁹

As such, it is my view that the vicious agent described here does in fact have available the circumstances according to which they can improve their character: they are ‘curable’ in the formal sense. It now becomes clear, however, that the path to moral improvement is not pleasant for those who are capable of walking it. The curably vicious agent’s self-awareness which is brought out by others expressing their discontent with what they done is, to be sure, a good thing: it facilitates their improvement by making clear that what they have done was wrong. But this self-awareness is also potentially dangerous, for when the vicious agent becomes ever more aware of themselves, this awareness carries enough force to, at least in some cases, exhort them to kill themselves (1166b13-14). So because the vicious agent is in this vulnerable state, any sort of punishments or ‘cure(s)’ which may contribute to their moral improvement will need to operate with considerable care. For these must make it clear that the agent’s vicious actions are wrong, but they must do this in a way that does not escalate their self-hate.

As I have argued, to be effective, these punishments must start from the bottom up, aiming first to re-habituate the vicious agent’s pleasures and pains so that they can come to see - and eventually endorse and act on - the correct conception of the good. It is now necessary to specify, however, that I don’t think that getting a vicious agent to further dislike the content of their character is an explicit goal that punishing practices should adopt in the project of attempting to reform vicious agents. To further habituate them in this way may be counterproductive. As such, the main goal of punishment, insofar as it aims at improving the offender, I think, should be to make the agent in question disapprove of their vicious *actions*. For these are the sorts of actions which result from their failure to follow the correct conception of the good, which itself traces back to their prior bad habits in pleasures and pains. These sorts of actions should be punished so that the agent in question may become further habituated to

¹⁹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Book 3: 1053-1071. Trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (2001).

disapprove of them, and so be motivated to act differently in the future. And insofar as performing actions of a sort produces corresponding character traits - which Aristotle takes to be a fairly basic principle of character development - the vicious agent's new modes of thought and action begin to be reflective of a new, better version of themselves.

So it looks as though Aristotle does think that curably vicious agents exist. Their existence is formally recognized, as I have argued, at *NE* 1166b5-30 where Aristotle explicitly describes a vicious agent who has available the circumstances according to which they can improve their character. In order to further support this interpretation, I'd like to now discuss Aristotle's claims at *NE* 1166b5-30 regarding the vicious agent's regret; for the presence of regret in vicious agents is, as I have argued, a key indicator of curability.

At 1166b26 Aristotle claims that vicious people (φᾶῶλοι) "are full of regret (μεταμελείας)" (1166b26). In section 4, I argued that incurably vicious agents - those who embody the features of the general character type 'vice' - do not regret their actions or their character. I argued that their lack of regret with regard to particular actions is explained by the fact that they act from decision, and their lack of regret with regard to their character is explained by the fact that they are unaware of the fact that they are actually vicious. Here, at *NE* 1166b5-30, we have a claim not about the absence of regret in the vicious psyche, but about the *presence* of regret, and again, as with Aristotle's claims in *NE* VII, it is not immediately clear how far the claim is supposed to extend. What does the vicious agent described here have regrets about and why?

In particular places of the passage, there is a clear focus on the conflict experienced by the vicious agent at the level of particular actions. For example, Aristotle claims that the vicious agent goes some distance to avoid being alone, for when they are alone, "they remember many disturbing *actions* and foresee others like them" (1166b16). In addition, Aristotle's claim that one part of the vicious person's soul "grieves in abstaining from *certain things*, while the other element is pleased" (1166b21-22) also seems to be indicate conflict at the level of particular actions. These claims about the vicious agent's conflict ultimately lead Aristotle to the crucial point that vicious people "are full of regret" (1166b26). Since this point is arrived at by various

considerations about the vicious agent's conflict, given that some of these claims focus directly on their actions, I take it that the vicious agent described here has regrets about their actions.

But why should this be so? Considering that the reason why I took Aristotle's incurably vicious agent to have no regrets with respect to their actions was that they act from decision, a question that arises here is *why* the vicious agent Aristotle discusses here *does* regret their actions. The answer cannot be that curably vicious agents *fail* to act from decision. Aristotle quite consistently maintains that a state will fail to be a *vice* unless it is a state that decides. For example, at *EE* 1234a24-25, Aristotle distinguishes virtues and vices from emotional dispositions, claiming that the latter "are not virtues, nor are their opposites vices, since they do not involve decision (προαίρεσις)." And at *NE* 1135b19-25, Aristotle explains that a person may perform an *act* of injustice out of spirit or some other feeling, but they are not unjust unless they act from decision: "people who inflict these sorts of harm and make these errors are committing injustice, and their actions are injustices, but it does not follow that the agents are unjust or wicked, because the harm done is not due to wickedness...But a person who acts like this from decision is unjust and wicked" (cf. *NE* 1105b30-1106a5, 1127b13-17).

So the reason for the curably vicious agent's regret with respect to their actions cannot be that they fail to act from decision. What, then, is it that causes them to regret what they do? To some extent, the answer has already been seen: the process of the curably vicious agent's being "led into better ways of living and talking" (*Cat* 13a24-25) by means of punishment - at least as Aristotle characterizes them at *NE* 1166b5-30 - has already started to take some effect. By way of a re-habitation of their pleasures and pains, their previously corrupted ἀρχή has begun to become *uncorrupted*. This reversal makes them *not* incapable of being able to discern the true conception of the good, and it is the reason why they regret what they do. For if they became vicious by, for example, living a life that values bodily pleasure above all, but in the process of reform by means of punishment they became faintly aware that there may be other, better ways of living, and better things to value than bodily pleasure - and moreover, that their actions in accordance with their over-valuing bodily pleasures have *harmed* others - this is grounds for regretting having become the sort of person who values bodily pleasure above all and acts in accordance with these values. Of course, it's unlikely that such a person has a well worked-out

idea of what the good really is, but the point is just that they are not incapable of seeing it. Their previous decision becomes unsettled, and their ἀρχή starts to become uncorrupted by a re-habituation of their pleasures and pains, which is brought on by effective punishments. And so looking back at their previous actions, they have regrets about what they have done. Regret at the level of particular actions, then, is one indicator that vicious agent described here is curable.

But what about their character? Unlike Aristotle's standard, incurably vicious agent - the vicious person who has no regrets with respect to their character - are we to say that the curably vicious agent described in *NE* IX.4, by contrast, in addition to regretting their actions, also regrets their character? I think that they do. There are parts of the passage which focus directly on the vicious agent's view about their character. For example, Aristotle claims not just that the vicious agent is conflicted about their actions, but also that they disapprove of *themselves*: "Because they have no qualities worthy of love, they feel no relation of friendship to themselves" (1166b17-18). Again in the discussion of the conflicted vicious soul, Aristotle claims that the vicious agent "wishes that these things had not become pleasant for him" (1166b23-24). The reference here again seems to be to the vicious agent's attitude about *what they are*, and not merely their view of how they act. And just a few lines down, Aristotle claims that the vicious agent is not "disposed in a friendly way even to himself, because he has nothing worthy of love" (1166b25-26). Finally, when Aristotle claims that the vicious person is "by themselves they remember many disturbing actions *and foresee others like them*" (1166b15-16), this foreseeing seems to indicate that they are aware that their character is what issues in their actions (which they are also regretful about): it is what causes them to act as they do. Unlike the incurably vicious agent, then, Aristotle's curably vicious agent has a sort of self-awareness, and they do seem to have regrets about the content of their character. Unlike the incurably vicious agent, then, the curably vicious agent regrets both their actions and their character, and these are taken to indicate that they are curable.

In conclusion, I would like to explain why I do not think that Aristotle's contrasting claims about vice in *NE* VII and IX.4 amount to an inconsistency, against what many scholars have suggested. The general worry in the current interpretive literature is this: how can the vicious agent embody the features that Aristotle ascribes to them in both *NE* VII and IX.4, given

that these features seem to be incompatible? Specifically: how can it be that the vicious agent is both full of regrets and void of regrets?

One sort of answer which has been suggested stresses the Platonic position which is echoed in Aristotle *NE* IX.4 characterization of vice, and moves to suggest a chronological thesis: given that Aristotle's affinities to Plato's views are likely to have weakened over time, it is likely that *NE* IX.4 was written first and perhaps also with Plato's view of vice specifically in mind; and since the *NE* VII characterization sees a significant departure from Plato's view, it must have been written later. As such, though these two characterizations of vice amount to an inconsistency, we can at least give an explanation for it.²⁰

Others suspect that Aristotle is genuinely puzzled by the vicious psyche, but that his puzzlement does not merit blame, for, as David Roochnik puts it, "precisely in being inconsistent, [Aristotle] accurately captures something essential about the phenomenon of viciousness," namely, "the conflicting ways in which we experience, process, or simply cope with it."²¹ Accordingly, while Aristotle's two characterizations of the vicious agent are indeed inconsistent, they are nonetheless commendable, for "in his very inconsistency Aristotle 'saves' the phenomenon of the vicious."²²

Yet another position which has gained traction in the literature is the view that in *NE* VII and IX.4 Aristotle is describing two different stages of the vicious agent's development. According to this view, we can retain the conflicting claims from *NE* VII and IX.4 by supposing that the sort of person characterized in one book is the developmental outcome of the sort of person characterized in the other.²³

While each of these interpretations are unique in their own right, they all share a common assumption. The assumption is that if there is an ethical category of vice for Aristotle, the sorts of

²⁰ This is the view of Annas (1977). Bostock (2000), p. 173 makes a similar suggestion. Grant (1885) Vol. 2, p. 290-291 goes so far to cite *Lysis* 214c as the particular passage which Aristotle has in mind here. For a more wide-reaching treatment of Aristotle's philosophical development, see Jaeger (1948).

²¹ Roochnik (2007), p. 214.

²² Roochnik (2007), p. 207. For a less forgiving account of the idea that Aristotle is puzzled by the vicious psyche, see Hampton (1990), p. 30-31.

²³ This view is most extensively defended by Brickhouse (2003). A similar sort of interpretation is made by Pakaluk (1998), p. 176-177. More recently, a version of this sort of view is also suggested by Nielsen (2017), p. 10.

characters which exist in that category cannot have contrary psychologies if the category is to be viewed as consistent. Put differently, they all assume that if Aristotle's description of the ethical category 'vice' makes essential reference two conflicting things - particularly, the presence and absence of regret in the vicious agent's psyche - it cannot be rendered a consistent ethical category. As such, since in different passages Aristotle does indeed claim that vicious people are both unregretful and regretful of their vice, his account of vice must be inconsistent.

This is an assumption which I reject, and in so doing, I commit myself to the view that Aristotle's account of vice is consistent. On my view, a proper interpretation of Aristotle's account of vice must observe a distinction between what Aristotle recognizes as two distinct sorts of vicious agents: those who are incurable and those who are not. As I have argued, incurably vicious agents are the standard type, and curably vicious agents are token exceptional cases which violate what is true of the standard type in several ways. When we observe this type/token distinction, it becomes clear that the fact that Aristotle characterizes the sorts of people who exist in the ethical category 'vice' in two contrasting ways need not lead to the conclusion that his account of vice is inconsistent. This is because what is true of the general character type 'vice,' need not turn out to be true in every particular token case for the ethical category to be rendered consistent. If we simply allow it to be the case that Aristotle's two characterizations of vice are representative of two different, paradigmatic sorts of vicious agents, the alleged inconsistency vanishes.

But one might object here on the grounds that, if this is Aristotle's view, why doesn't he say anything of the sort? In reply, it is worth stressing that these claims about vice which arise in *NE* VII and IX.4 are not really discussions *about vice*. *NE* VII is admittedly a difficult book which treats several problems, but it is mainly about continence and incontinence, and Aristotle says this much near the beginning of the book: "Now we must discuss incontinence, softness, and effeminacy, as well as continence and endurance" (1145a35-36). A similar thing can be said of *NE* IX.4. There Aristotle is trying to show that only a good man can be a friend to himself and to others. He works toward that conclusion by proceeding from the principle that, "The origin of relations of friendship towards our neighbors, and of the characteristics by which we distinguish various kinds of friendship, seems to be in our relations to ourselves" (1166a1-2).

So we can see why in both places Aristotle might not feel the need to explicitly say that his view of vice observes a distinction between two paradigmatic sorts of vicious agents which both fall into the same ethical category. This is because these claims about vice are each uniquely situated in discussions with distinct intellectual aims, and in neither is vice the topic of inquiry. We might plausibly infer, then, that Aristotle does think that there is a phenomenon of viciousness, but it need not be just *one* thing in order to be consistent. That is, it need not be the case that all vicious agents must suffer (or not suffer) from the same psychic condition in order to be classified as vicious.²⁴

²⁴ This paper has greatly benefitted from discussions with Julia Annas, Rachana Kamtekar, Dan Russell, and Jeremy Reid.

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