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Christopher B. Ansberry

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WHAT DOES JERUSALEM HAVE TO DO WITH ATHENS? THE MORAL VISION OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AND ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS**

Christopher B. Ansberry
Wheaton College

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* serve as a more useful heuristic model for understanding the moral vision of the book of Proverbs than Socrates' ethical theory. While Socratic ethics provide a general guide to portions of the sapiential material, Aristotle's emphasis on the organic relationship between moral and intellectual virtues as well as the role of character in ethical decisions accounts for the variegated materials within the book as a whole. In the view of the differences between Aristotle and Socrates' ethical theory and their relationship to the book of Proverbs, Aristotle's ethics illuminate the moral dimensions of the document. Similar to Aristotle, the sages present the collaboration of character and intellect as the acme of moral development: character proves the constitutional base for the appropriation of wisdom and determines the goal of virtuous activity, while wisdom identifies the means for achieving that goal in a particular situation. This teleological thesis captures the fundamental features of sapiential ethics.

"The Greek concern for virtue, which seems to be receiving renewed interest among moral philosophers, is closer to the Old Testament ethics" than our modern preoccupation with individual conscience and the consequences of our actions.¹ This striking assertion by Cyril Rodd provides an indication of the heuristic framework that dominates modern ethical investigations of the Old Testament in general and the wisdom literature in particular. The classical concern with virtues or dispositions—the traits that constitute character—has been revived in contemporary moral discourse through the discipline of virtue ethics or character ethics. This virtue-based approach to the ethical enterprise is employed by many scholars to investigate the moral dimensions of Israel's sapiential material, particularly the book of Proverbs.²

* I am grateful for the insightful comments made on an earlier version of this essay by Michael Fox. Professor Fox's wisdom and perceptive comments have contributed significantly to the present work. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Daniel I. Bock for providing invaluable feedback on the structure of the essay. Any errors of logic or substance are entirely my own.

¹ C. R. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (OTS; London: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 277.

² See B. C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, 1991), pp. 321–353; W. P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 22–49; C. J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), pp. 363–683; C. R. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, pp. 273–282.

However, the relationship between the classical Greek concern with virtue and the moral vision of the book of Proverbs is given particular expression in the recent work of Michael Fox.³

Fox explores the relationship between Greek ethical theory and the book of Proverbs through the work of Socrates. In the main, Fox incorporates the fundamental principles of Socratic ethics as a heuristic model for understanding the ethical presuppositions behind the variegated materials within the book of Proverbs.⁴ For Fox, the ethical vision of both Proverbs and Socrates is based on three basic principles: (1) virtue is knowledge; (2) no one does wrong willingly; and (3) all virtues are one.⁵ In light of the ethical and epistemological correlation between Proverbs and Socrates, Fox concludes that both attempt to demonstrate that “human knowledge is a sufficient precondition for virtue.”⁶ This conclusion not only accounts for Proverbs’ particular concern with wisdom, but it also allows Proverbs to provide a comprehensive guide to ethical behavior without recourse to the Torah.⁷

In view of Fox’s work and the preoccupation with virtue in modern ethical discourse, it is necessary to compare the ethics of Proverbs with a classic work on moral virtue: Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. This comparison is significant in at least two respects. First, human virtue is the central topic of both Aristotle’s ethics and the book of Proverbs. Since the materials within Proverbs address a variety of virtues in order to provide the addressee with a kaleidoscopic and paradigmatic portrait of the wise life,⁸ the comparison with Aristotle may reveal the degree to which the moral vision of Proverbs is similar to and different from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Second, Aristotle’s ethical vision is different from the ethical theory of Socrates. In light of the differences between the two approaches, the comparison with Proverbs may reveal whether Aristotle provides a better model for understanding the sapiential material than Socrates. That is, the comparison may reveal the degree

³ M. V. Fox, “Ethics and Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs,” *HS* 48 (2007): 75–88; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18B; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 934–945.

⁴ M. V. Fox, “Ethics and Wisdom,” p. 75.

⁵ M. V. Fox, “Ethics and Wisdom,” p. 77.

⁶ M. V. Fox, “Ethics and Wisdom,” p. 88; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 944. For a discussion of the similarities between the epistemology of Proverbs and Socratic epistemology, see M. V. Fox, “The Epistemology of the Book of Proverbs,” *JBL* 126 (2007): 669–684; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, pp. 963–976.

⁷ M. V. Fox, “Ethics and Wisdom,” p. 88; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 944.

⁸ T. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth* (VTSup 90; Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 40–41.

to which Aristotle's ethics serve as a useful heuristic model for understanding the ethical prescriptions within the book of Proverbs.

In order to determine whether Aristotle's ethics provide a useful model for understanding the moral vision of Proverbs, it is necessary to examine two particular topics: (1) the differences between Aristotle and Socrates' ethical theory and their relationship to the book of Proverbs; and (2) the relationship between Aristotle's approach to ethics and the moral vision of the book of Proverbs. This essay will examine each topic in turn.

1. SOCRATES, ARISTOTLE, AND THE MORAL VISION OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

As noted above, Aristotle's moral vision differs from the ethical theory of Socrates. Though both philosophers identify virtue as the essence of human happiness and give particular attention to the role of knowledge in moral formation,⁹ the differences between their approaches to the ethical enterprise are striking. These differences may be summarized under two headings. The first pertains to the definition of virtue. For Socrates, virtue is equivalent to knowledge: to be just, for instance, is the same as knowing what it is to be just.¹⁰ Once a person has the relevant knowledge, the virtue follows immediately.¹¹ In contrast, Aristotle maintains that virtue does not follow immediately from knowledge of virtue.¹²

While knowledge is an essential element in the ethical equation, it is dependent upon a virtuous disposition, for a person's character gives direction to practical knowledge. Aristotle's emphasis on the organic relationship between moral and intellectual virtues is captured in the refrain that punctuates the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "human happiness is an activity of reason in accordance with virtue."¹³ That is, virtue is an activity that includes a person's moral and intellectual capacities: moral virtue identifies the goal, while practical wisdom determines the means for achieving the goal of virtuous activity in a particular situation.¹⁴ For Aristotle, character and intellect are

⁹ See Plato, *Protagoras* 352c–355d; Plato, *Apology* 30b; 41d; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1100b–1101a24.

¹⁰ Plato, *Meno* 87d; 88d; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, pp. 935–936; M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 95–96.

¹¹ M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 96.

¹² M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 96.

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a17–20.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1142b33; 1144a7–9; 1144b15–18. Also see S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 64–65, 77–78, 246; N. Sherman, "The Habituation

mutually dependent upon one another. On the one hand, a person cannot have a single virtue of character if its operation is not regulated by practical wisdom.¹⁵ On the other hand, a person cannot have practical wisdom if they lack the virtues of character that give virtuous activity direction.¹⁶

This emphasis on virtue as an activity and the role of character in ethical decisions reveals the fundamental difference between Aristotle and Socrates' ethical theory. For Socrates, virtue is knowledge; it is something good and beautiful in itself apart from external actions.¹⁷ For Aristotle, virtue is an activity that incorporates moral and intellectual faculties in order to perform the appropriate type of behavior in a particular situation. Aristotle's conception of virtue not only deviates from the first principle in Socrates' ethical theory, but it also raises several questions concerning the degree to which Socrates' ethic serves as a useful heuristic model for understanding the variegated materials within the book of Proverbs.

Fox incorporates the Socratic equation of virtue with knowledge in order to demonstrate that it serves as a "deep but unarticulated premise" underlying the ethical prescriptions within Proverbs.¹⁸ For Fox, the relationship between virtue and knowledge is given particular expression in the lectures and interludes of Proverbs 1–9. Here wisdom and moral virtue are bound together as cause and effect.¹⁹ The preamble indicates that the acquisition of wisdom, righteousness, justice, and equity are inseparable (Prov 1:3). The second lecture demonstrates that wisdom produces these moral virtues and guards the addressee from evil temptations (Prov 2:9, 11–12, 16), while the remainder of the lectures describe how wisdom protects the addressee from moral perversion and enables him to perceive the end of his actions (Prov 4:1–9, 10–19; 6:20–35; 7:1–27). The combination of wisdom with virtuous activity within the prologue leads Fox to conclude that wisdom is equivalent to virtue in the sapiential material. That is, wisdom is the necessary precondition for virtue, since knowing the good is tantamount to doing the good.²⁰

of Character," in *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays* (ed. N. Sherman; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 232; L. A. Kosman, "Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle's Ethics," in *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays* (ed. N. Sherman; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 272; D. Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 88–89, 200, 370; M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 231–232.

¹⁵ M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 231.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144a22–1145a11; M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 231–232.

¹⁷ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.9.5; S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, p. 57.

¹⁸ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 78; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 936.

¹⁹ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 79; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 937.

²⁰ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 80; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 938.

For Fox, this conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the book of Proverbs never calls the addressee to be righteous; rather it demands that he acquire wisdom so that he might cultivate the moral virtues that accompany this intellectual state.²¹

In general, the Socratic equation of wisdom with virtue appears to provide a useful heuristic model for understanding the ethical prescriptions within Proverbs 1–9. However, when we account for the variegated materials within the book as a whole, it appears that the appropriation of wisdom is only one half of the ethical equation. Wisdom may be a necessary precondition for virtue, but it must be accompanied by a virtuous disposition. Aristotle's emphasis on character not only supplements Socrates' ethical theory, but it also serves as a more comprehensive framework through which to view the variegated materials within the book of Proverbs, for Proverbs combines the formation of character with the acquisition of wisdom.

The necessity of a virtuous disposition for moral activity is evident throughout the book of Proverbs. In fact, a virtuous disposition is the fundamental prerequisite for the acquisition of wisdom. This is apparent in the *Leitmotif* of the book. For the sages, the fear of YHWH (יִרְאַת יְהוָה) is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7; cf. Prov 1:29; 2:5; 9:10; 30:3). This phrase highlights the importance of character in the ethical enterprise; it demonstrates that a pious disposition is the foundation of wisdom, the seed-bed in which wisdom is cultivated. The fear of YHWH is neither a theoretical slogan nor a pure intellectual state; rather it is a pious disposition that serves as the constitutional base for the appropriation of wisdom.²² It represents the requisite moral posture one must assume in order to acquire wisdom, exercise virtue, and avoid evil (Prov 3:7; 8:13; 16:6).²³ The fear of YHWH plays an important role in the ethics of Proverbs. The concept introduces a relational dimension to the acquisition of virtue and situates the appropriation of wisdom in moral character.²⁴ In so doing, the *Leitmotif* not only accounts for the mutual dependence of character and wisdom within the moral vision of Proverbs, but it also raises questions concerning the degree to which Socrates' ethical theory serves as a useful heuristic model for understanding Proverbs. Fox acknowledges that the fear of YHWH is an atti-

²¹ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 80; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 938.

²² G. von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970), p. 96; W. P. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, p. 28; R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 255.

²³ W. P. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, p. 28.

²⁴ W. P. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, p. 28.

tude that is incompatible with Socratic ethics.²⁵ He maintains that the fear of YHWH is not wisdom; rather it is the first step to wisdom.²⁶ While Socrates' ethic does not provide a framework within which to evaluate the fear of YHWH, Aristotle's ethical theory serves as a useful heuristic model for understanding the book's motto. If the fear of YHWH is considered a moral disposition to which wisdom contributes and upon which it depends,²⁷ then Aristotle's emphasis on the mutual dependence of character and wisdom in virtuous activity accounts for the fundamental features of the book's *Leitmotif*.

Together with the fear of YHWH, the relationship between moral virtue and intellectual virtue is given particular expression in the sentence literature (Prov 10:1–29:27). The combination of sayings on wisdom and sayings on righteousness suggests that moral and intellectual virtues are intimately related in the sapiential perspective.²⁸ The antithetical sayings in Proverbs 10–15 present a morally bifurcated world in which the righteous/wise are set against the wicked/fool. While these moral and intellectual polarities, their synonyms and equivalent phrases, overlap in certain instances (Prov 10:16–17, 31; 11:9, 30), the antithetical sets are not interchangeable.²⁹ However, their relationship may be described as co-referential. That is, the antitheses do not have the same meaning or sense, but they refer to the same reality, the same referent in a given context.³⁰ The righteous/wise, the wicked/fool, and related vocabulary in either semantic field describe the positive and negative, the moral and intellectual traits of the same type of person. The combination of these moral and intellectual polarities suggests that the moral vision of Proverbs is comparable to the ethical theory of Aristotle, for both identify the necessity of moral character and practical wisdom for virtuous behavior.

²⁵ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 81; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 939.

²⁶ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 81; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 939.

²⁷ See R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, p. 256.

²⁸ See M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," pp. 78–79; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, pp. 936–937.

²⁹ R. B. Y. Scott, "Wise and Foolish, Righteous and Wicked," in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (ed. G. W. Anderson; Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 153; C. Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (trans. J. D. Charles; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 84; R. Scoralick, *Einzelspruch und Sammlung* (BZAW 232; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 67–73; R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, pp. 267–268.

³⁰ P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1979), pp. 160–161; K. M. Heim, *Like Grapes of Gold Set in Silver: An Interpretation of Proverbial Clusters in Proverbs 10:1–22:16* (BZAW 273; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 81–101; T. Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, p. 25; B. K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 93.

In addition to the association of wisdom with righteousness, the sentence literature demonstrates that moral virtue is essential for right behavior. Numerous aphorisms describe the disposition of the צַדִּיק (e.g., Prov 9:9; 10:11, 32; 11:23; 12:5), the רָשָׁע (e.g., Prov 10:20; 12:10; 15:28; 17:23; 21:10), the יֹשֵׁר (e.g., Prov 11:3, 6; 12:6; 16:17), the נָדָב (Prov 11:24–25), the תָּמִים (e.g., Prov 11:5, 20), the תְּרוּחַ (e.g., Prov 10:4; 12:11, 24, 27; 13:4, 11; 14:23; 15:19), and the עֲצֵל—רָמִיָּה (e.g., Prov 6:9–11; 24:30–34; 26:13–17), to name a few. These personages are not evaluated from an intellectual perspective; rather they are examined from a moral perspective. The sentence literature profiles the distinctive features of these personages to provide “characterizations of character;”³¹ that is, it identifies particular virtues, values, qualities, and traits embodied in certain character types to cultivate a virtuous disposition in the addressee. In so doing, the sentence literature not only highlights the importance of character in virtuous activity, but it also provides a concrete portrait of character in action. This is significant, for Aristotle defines virtue as a teleological activity in which character and intellect work together to achieve a particular end. In contrast, Socrates defines human happiness as mere knowledge, that is, virtue unused rather than virtue in action.³² In light of Proverbs’ concern with moral virtue and its emphasis on virtue in action, it seems that Aristotle’s ethic serves as a more useful heuristic model for understanding the ethical prescriptions within the book of Proverbs.

Aristotle’s emphasis on virtue as an activity and the role of character in ethical decisions differs from the first principle of Socrates’ ethic and provides a foundation for the second major difference between Aristotle’s and Socrates’ moral vision. Socrates’ second ethical principle is that no one does wrong willingly.³³ This principle is based on the assumption that unethical behavior is always harmful to the agent and no one desires his own harm.³⁴ As a result, failure to act according to virtue is due to ignorance—the agent does the wrong because he lacks the relevant knowledge. Socrates’ appeal to ignorance is not surprising, since it is the opposite of knowledge, which constitutes virtue. Though Aristotle accounts for ignorance in ethical decisions, he also emphasizes the role of character. This is consistent with his focus on the mutual dependence of moral virtue and intellectual virtue in the ethical enterprise. Aristotle maintains that immoral behavior may be the result of

³¹ W. P. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, p. 19.

³² S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, p. 57.

³³ Plato, *Meno* 77cd; M. V. Fox, “Ethics and Wisdom,” p. 82; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 940.

³⁴ Plato, *Protagoras* 352b; M. V. Fox, “Ethics and Wisdom,” p. 82; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 940.

ignorance.³⁵ However, this is not always the case. People may perceive the right form of behavior in a given situation, but fail to do the right thing because what they perceive is clouded by a wicked disposition.³⁶ The inclusion of character into the ethical equation provides a more comprehensive account of moral virtue than Socrates' second principle. For Aristotle, character plays a fundamental role in ethical decisions. A virtuous disposition contributes to wisdom by making the end right, while a wicked disposition distorts the agent's vision of the end. This leads Aristotle to conclude that unethical behavior is not simply the product of ignorance; it may also be the result of a corrupt disposition.

The same is true in Proverbs. On the one hand, the book delineates the characteristic features of the ignorant. The lectures and interludes give particular attention to the כָּסִיל, the בָּעַר, and the חָסֵד-לֵב—personages who are distinguished by their indifference to knowledge. The כָּסִיל despises wisdom and is inclined to immoderation because of his inability to assess particular situations (Prov 1:22; 10:18; 12:23). The בָּעַר hates correction (Prov 12:1), while the חָסֵד-לֵב lacks the intellectual capacity to perceive the consequences of his actions (Prov 6:32). In each case, ignorance is the fundamental problem, as these personages fail to weigh the apparent magnitude of their decisions against the consequences that await their actions.³⁷

On the other hand, Proverbs delineates the characteristic features of the morally perverse through the אָוִיל, the רָשָׁע, and the לֵיץ. While Proverbs evaluates the intellectual temperament of these characters, it seems that their ignorance is simply the by-product of their moral disposition.³⁸ The אָוִיל is portrayed as a morally incorrigible individual (Prov 12:15),³⁹ who despises discipline and correction (Prov 15:5), delights in evil conduct (Prov 10:23), and lacks self-control (Prov 12:16). The רָשָׁע is depicted as an antisocial individual characterized by greed (Prov 10:3), violence (Prov 10:6), deceit (Prov 12:5), perverse speech (Prov 10:32; 11:11; 15:28), and cruelty (Prov 12:10), while the לֵיץ is the embodiment of hubris—his arrogance and resis-

³⁵ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1110b1–34; 1136a5–9.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b25–28; VII 3; 1103b25–1104a10; J. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62 (1979): 331–350; repr. N. Sherman, ed., *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 124–125.

³⁷ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 83; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, pp. 940–941.

³⁸ In contrast, Fox argues that the perversity of these personages is the result of their ignorance (M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 84; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 941). However, the characterization of these personages within Proverbs suggests that their perversity is result of their corrupt disposition, which prevents them from acquiring wisdom.

³⁹ See M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 40.

tance to chastisement prevents him from acquiring wisdom, even if he chooses to seek it (Prov 14:6).⁴⁰

Together, these characterizations suggest that within the sapiential perspective unethical behavior is not simply the product of ignorance; it is also the result of a corrupt disposition. The ignorance of these personages is not attributed to their intellectual aptitude; rather it is associated with their moral character, which perverts their reason. These characterizations indicate that Aristotle's emphasis on both intellectual and moral virtues in ethical decisions provides a better model for understanding the materials in Proverbs than Socrates' second principle. In contrast to Socrates and Fox, the sages did not believe that "ignorance alone is the problem and wisdom alone the solution."⁴¹ Rather, in light of the characters that punctuate the material, it seems that ignorance and moral corruption are the problem. The solution to these intellectual and moral states is found in the acquisition of wisdom and the pedagogy of the parents, which shape the predilection of the addressee.

In view of the fundamental differences between Aristotle and Socrates' ethical theory, it appears that Aristotle provides a more useful heuristic model through which to understand the moral vision of Proverbs. Though Socrates' ethical principles serve as a general guide to portions of the sapiential material, Aristotle's emphasis on the mutual dependence of character and wisdom as well as the role of character in ethical decisions accounts for the variegated materials within the book as a whole. The similarities between the moral vision of Proverbs and the ethical theory of Aristotle suggest that it is necessary to supplement Fox's conclusion concerning the ethics of Proverbs. For Fox, the primary axiom of sapiential ethics is that "the exercise of the human mind is the necessary and sufficient condition of right and successful behavior."⁴² For both Proverbs and Aristotle, it appears the primary axiom of sapiential ethics is that moral character and practical wisdom are necessary for virtuous behavior: character provides the constitutional base for the appropriation of wisdom and determines the goal of virtuous activity, while wisdom identifies the means for achieving that goal in a particular situation. Character plays a fundamental role in the moral vision of Proverbs as well as the ethics of Aristotle; its absence in Socrates' ethical theory may explain Aristotle's critique of Socratic ethics. According to

⁴⁰ M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, p. 42.

⁴¹ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 85; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 942.

⁴² M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 75.

Aristotle, Socrates' mistake was that "he used to inquire what virtue is, but not how and from what sources it arises."⁴³

2. THE MORAL VISION OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AND ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

If Aristotle's ethics provide a useful heuristic model for understanding the ethical prescriptions within Proverbs, then the question concerning the degree to which Aristotle's approach to ethics compares with the ethics of Proverbs remains. Though Aristotle's moral vision differs from the ethics of Proverbs in several ways, his approach to the ethical enterprise is comparable to Proverbs in two respects. The first pertains to the appropriation of moral and intellectual virtues. Aristotle argues that moral values are cultivated through the process of habituation in which an agent regularly performs actions similar to those with moral virtue in order to form a stable disposition.⁴⁴ This disposition serves as the base for the appropriation of practical wisdom, which is acquired through instruction. For Aristotle, instruction provides the rationale for virtuous activity as well as the means for determining the right type of behavior in a particular situation.⁴⁵ Together, habituation and instruction represent distinct approaches that are mutually dependent upon one another: habituation shapes the agent's moral character, while instruction provides the agent with the rationale for virtuous activity as well as the intellectual capacity to read a situation and act in accordance with virtue.

Both approaches are incorporated in the book of Proverbs. On the one hand, the lectures and interludes within the prologue as well as the materials in Prov 22:17–24:34 and 31:1–9 are cast in the instructional form. These instructions inculcate perception and demonstrate that wisdom enables the addressee to recognize the consequences of his actions. On the other hand, the process of habituation is apparent in Proverb's use of repetition. The sentence literature contains a series of variant repetitions that reinforce particular virtues and elaborate on their ethical significance.⁴⁶ In addition, the

⁴³ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1216b10–11; cf. 1216b19–22.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a14–1103b25.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a14–16.

⁴⁶ See W. P. Brown, "The Pedagogy of Proverbs 10:1–31:9," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. W. P. Brown; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 150–182; C. R. Yoder, "Forming 'Fearers of Yahweh': Repetition and Contradiction as Pedagogy in Proverbs," in *Seeking out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. K. G. Friebel, R. L. Troxel, D. R. Magary; Winona

sapiential material focuses on a specific cast of characters and assesses various virtues from an anthropocentric and theocentric perspective. In so doing, the book incorporates a pedagogical technique that is comparable to Aristotle's concept of habituation. The repetitions within Proverbs indicate that moral virtue is acquired through practice and imitation. Through imitation, the agent acquires a virtuous disposition by performing actions similar to those with virtue. This principle is apparent in Proverbs' use of repetition. However, it is given particular expression in Prov 13:30:

הַלֹּךְ אֶת-הַחֲכָמִים וְחָכָם The one who walks with the wise becomes wise,
וְרֵעָה כְּסִילִים יָרוּעַ but whoever associates with fools suffers harm.

In addition to imitation, both Aristotle and Proverbs recognize the importance of perception in ethical decisions. Aristotle refuses to reduce moral virtue to a set of universal rules, since situations would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong.⁴⁷ For Aristotle, ethics is not a systematic science concerned with general principles; rather it is an activity that requires perception—a faculty of discrimination that is concerned with the recognition of concrete particulars in specific circumstances.⁴⁸ Perception plays a fundamental role in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In fact, it serves as the bridge between moral and intellectual virtue. Perception provides the agent with the ability to read an initially opaque situation in such a way that moral character and practical wisdom produce a virtuous response.⁴⁹

Though perception is implicit within Proverbs, it plays an important role within the book's ethical vision. Similar to Aristotle, Proverbs recognizes the limitations of moral rules. In essence, proverbs are not universal rules; rather they are general paradigms that require personal judgment and engagement on the part of the moral subject in order to determine the appropriate form of behavior in a given situation. The role of perception in ethical decisions is a fundamental assumption in the book of Proverbs. This assumption is illustrated through the juxtaposition of two prominent contradictory pairs (26:4–5):

Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), pp. 172–179. For a catalog of the variant repetitions within Proverbs, see D. C. Snell, *Twice-Told Proverbs and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1993).

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b25–1104a10; J. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," p. 127.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1140a25–1140b30; 1142a25–30. Also see M. C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 300–301.

⁴⁹ S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, p. 250.

אַל-תַּעֲן כָּסִיל כְּאַוִּלָּתוֹ	Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
כִּן-תִּשְׁוֶה-לּוֹ גַּם-אַתָּה	lest you become like him—even you!
עֲנֵה כָּסִיל כְּאַוִּלָּתוֹ	Answer a fool according to his folly,
כִּן-יִהְיֶה חָכָם בְּעֵינָיו	lest he become wise in his own eyes.

These opposing admonitions have given rise to several different interpretations. On the one hand, the contradiction may be more apparent than real. That is, the former couplet may address the manner in which one is to respond to the fool (Prov 26:4), while the latter describes the obligation to expose the folly of the intractable (Prov 26:5).⁵⁰ On the other hand, the individual aphorisms may assume situational variability⁵¹ or express the tension between the didactic responsibilities and potential risks inherent in an encounter with the fool.⁵² Whether the juxtaposition refers to different aspects of the same situation or the dialectical tension between the responsibilities and risks intrinsic to dialogue with the fool, the collocation illustrates the general, paradigmatic nature of aphoristic speech as well as the limitations of moral rules. The admonitions reflect on the ambiguities of life and force the addressee to distinguish between what is appropriate and inappropriate in a particular situation. They demonstrate that wisdom is a matter of perception; the wise must read the situation and respond accordingly, whether in reticence, restraint, or reproof. Together with imitation, perception represents the second major way in which the moral vision of Proverbs is comparable to the ethical theory of Aristotle.

However, in spite of these similarities, Aristotle's approach to ethics differs from Proverbs in at least three respects. The first pertains to Aristotle's conception of virtue as a mean state. For Aristotle, virtue is an intermediate state between two extremes: a vice of excess and a vice of defect.⁵³ This schema may be illustrated through Aristotle's description of courage. Aristotle argues that courage is an intermediate state that falls between rashness, on the one hand, and cowardice, on the other.⁵⁴ These extremes correspond with particular vices associated with character: the tendency to

⁵⁰ This proposal assumes that the ambiguous preposition כִּן may be rendered differently in the individual admonitions (cf. LXX). See A. Meinhold, *Die Sprüche, Teil 2: Sprüche Kapitel 16–31* (ZBK 16.2; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1991), pp. 437–438; B. K. Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, p. 349.

⁵¹ W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (OTL; Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1970), p. 596; R. C. Van Leeuwen, "The Book of Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *NIB* 5:224.

⁵² See K. G. Hoglund, "The Fool and the Wise in Dialogue," in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.* (ed. E. F. Huwiler, K. G. Hoglund, R. E. Murphy; JSOTSup 58; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), pp. 175–176.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1107a1–9.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1107b1–5; 1115a6–1115b5.

be too relaxed and the tendency to panic. Aristotle's doctrine of the mean serves as a framework within which to identify the relationship between various virtues and vices. However, this framework finds no parallel in Proverbs.

The book of Proverbs presents a static, bipolar world in which the righteous are set against the wicked, the wise are set against the fool, the competent are set against the simple, the generous are set against the miser, and the diligent are set against the lazy. This bifurcated world stands in stark contrast to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. While Aristotle perceives virtue as an intermediate state between two extremes, Proverbs assumes a bipolar world in which all people belong to one of two distinguishable groups based on their moral and intellectual disposition. Among the personages in Proverbs, the *פֶּה־טָהוֹר* is the only character that does not fit within this scheme. This explains why the book incorporates these moral and intellectual polarities to transform his naïve predilection and free him from his liminal state.

Second, Aristotle's discussion of character-related virtue is limited to six intermediate dispositions: courage, self-mastery, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, and justice.⁵⁵ Whether or not this list is intended to provide a comprehensive catalog of moral virtue,⁵⁶ the qualities of loyalty, humility, mercy, forgiveness, tactfulness, and discretion are conspicuously absent. Proverbs addresses these values and gives particular attention to topics that find no expression in Aristotle's moral taxonomy. For example, Proverbs develops the virtue of self-mastery through matters of speech (e.g., Prov 10:19; 13:3; 15:28), social propriety (e.g., Prov 25:6–7b, 7c–10, 11–12, 20; 26:1–12), sex (e.g., Prov 5:1–23; 6:20–35; 7:1–27; 31:2–3), and physical consumption (e.g., Prov 21:17; 23:20–21, 29–35), whereas Aristotle restricts his discussion to bodily pleasures. In addition, Proverbs elaborates on the issue of justice through concrete descriptions of legal (e.g., Prov 17:15; 18:5; 21:7), social (e.g., Prov 14:20–21, 31), and interpersonal affairs (e.g., Prov 20:14; 28:27), while Aristotle's discussion focuses on the theoretical concept of equal distribution.⁵⁷ In contrast to Aristotle, Proverbs provides a more comprehensive portrait of moral virtue as well as a more detailed depiction of character in action. While Aristotle provides a general guide to moral character, Proverbs presents an extensive description of moral virtue through graphic vignettes that illuminate the various dimensions of the wise life.

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1115a6–1128b35; 1129a1–1138b17.

⁵⁶ M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 118.

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1030b30–1138a3.

Third, Aristotle's ethical theory focuses on moral virtue and human happiness from an anthropological perspective without recourse to the divine. In contrast, Proverbs combines an anthropocentric frame of reference with a theological frame of reference in order to present an inclusive ethical vision. Though Proverbs is dominated by "mundane" aphorisms that provide an anthropocentric evaluation of life, the YHWH sayings are integral to the sapiential worldview. These sayings complement the more "mundane" aphorisms by affirming their significance and elaborating on their theological dimensions.⁵⁸ They provide a theological assessment of topics presented in the anthropological discourse to construct a comprehensive ethical vision that unites the two essential sides of the sapiential worldview. The conflation of mundane materials with religious sayings demonstrates that human knowledge of self cannot be divorced from knowledge of YHWH,⁵⁹ for an individual's character and conduct has implications in both the human world and the divine realm. The theological orientation of Proverb's moral vision stands in stark contrast to Aristotle's anthropocentric ethic. It represents the fundamental difference between sapiential ethics and Greek ethical theory.

In light of the differences between Aristotle and Socrates' ethical theory as well as the relationship between Aristotle's approach to ethics and the moral vision of Proverbs, it seems the *Nicomachean Ethics* provide a useful heuristic guide for understanding the ethical prescriptions within the book. This does not mean that Aristotle was influenced by the ethics of Proverbs; rather Proverbs and Aristotle developed an ethical theory that included the same basic elements. These elements included the mutual dependence of character and intellect in ethical decisions as well as the importance of imitation and perception in virtuous activity. Though the *Nicomachean Ethics* provide a philosophical account of virtue without recourse to the divine and discuss issues that find no parallel in the book of Proverbs, the work serves as a framework within which to evaluate the ethical presuppositions behind the variegated materials of Proverbs.

⁵⁸ F. M. Wilson, "Sacred and Profane? The Yahwistic Redaction of Proverbs Reconsidered," in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.* (ed. E. F. Huwiler, K. G. Hoglund, R. E. Murphy; JSOTSup 58; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 328.

⁵⁹ W. P. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, p. 3.

3. THE ETHICS OF PROVERBS: THE CONFLATION OF MORAL CHARACTER AND INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE

As a heuristic framework, Aristotle's ethical theory illuminates the moral dimensions of the book of Proverbs. In effect, the *Nicomachean Ethics* provide a blueprint for investigating the moral vision of the sages. Similar to Aristotle, the sages present the collaboration of character and intellect as the acme of moral development. The mutual dependence of character and intellect in virtuous activity is apparent throughout the sentence literature of Proverbs, but it is given particular expression in the preamble to the document (Prov 1:1–7). The combination of cognitive virtues and moral dispositions within the prolegomenon, coupled with the movement toward the document's *Leitmotif*, captures the fundamental purpose of the compendium as well as the moral vision of the book. The preamble not only indicates that moral and intellectual virtues are intimately related in the sapiential perspective, but it also delineates the ethical program of the sages: the acquisition of wisdom is dependent upon a virtuous disposition (Prov 1:7), while virtuous activity is dependent upon the acquisition of wisdom (Prov 1:2–6).

This ethical program is reflected throughout the subsequent compendia within the document. On the one hand, the lectures and interludes within the prologue exhibit a pedagogical scheme that moves from the formation of a virtuous disposition to the acquisition of wisdom. The exordia to the lectures and the interludes incorporate a variety of admonitions to transform the naïve temperament of the addressee (e.g., Prov 1:22–23; 2:1–11; 3:1–4; 3:21–26; 4:1–4a; 5:1–2; 6:20–23; 7:1–5; 8:4–11). In so doing, they shape the disposition of the subject and develop the requisite moral posture necessary for the acquisition of wisdom and the exercise of virtue prescribed in the lesson proper (Prov 1:24–33; 2:12–20; 3:5–12; 3:27–32b; 4:4b–9; 5:3–20; 6:24–33; 7:6–23; 8:12–31). On the other hand, the juxtaposition of the prologue with the sentence literature indicates that virtuous activity is dependent upon the acquisition of wisdom. The introductory lectures and interludes offer the addressee simple, rudimentary instruction. Their message is clear: do not steal, murder, or commit adultery; rather pursue wisdom, justice, and marital fidelity. This parochial, inchoate perspective on the wise life suggests that the lectures and interludes do not attempt to provide an inclusive ethical vision; rather they serve to inculcate receptivity and per-

suade the neophyte to acquire wisdom.⁶⁰ The acquisition of wisdom is the fundamental goal of the lectures and interludes; it serves as the intellectual precondition for the apprehension of the moral vision delineated in the sentence literature.

The sentence literature provides the moral subject with a kaleidoscopic and paradigmatic portrait of the wise life.⁶¹ These sayings catalog the characteristics of the wise, the fool, the righteous, the wicked, the slanderer, and the sluggard—archetypes who are introduced in the prologue but remain flat or one-dimensional without increasing in rotundity and profundity.⁶² The sentence literature profiles the distinctive, defining features of these personages to identify particular virtues, values, qualities, and traits embodied in certain character types. In so doing, the terse, pithy aphorisms present a complex, impressionistic portrait of various literary characters and ethical perspectives in order to shape the disposition of the addressee, sharpen his perception, and provide him with a lens through which to view the world. In light of the structure of the document, it seems the sentence literature presupposes the addressee has cultivated a virtuous disposition and acquired wisdom. Now the moral agent may navigate through the litany of sayings and incorporate the multifaceted ethical vision of the sages.

In the final analysis, it appears the *Nicomachean Ethics* serves as a useful heuristic guide for understanding the moral vision of Proverbs. Similar to Aristotle's ethical theory, character and intellect are fundamental to the ethical vision of Proverbs. These dispositions work together in a teleological system geared toward virtuous activity. Though the sages give particular attention to the power of the mind, they did not classify virtue as a mere species of knowledge;⁶³ rather they classified virtue and knowledge as a species of moral character. Proverbs combines moral and intellectual virtue to produce an ethical vision that is concerned with character formation. The collections are intended to provide insight into the order of human life and

⁶⁰ R. J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1998), p. 51; G. D. Pemberton, "The Rhetoric of the Father: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Father/Son Lectures in Proverbs 1–9" (Ph.D. diss.; The University of Denver, 1999), p. 91, *et passim*.

⁶¹ T. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, pp. 40–41.

⁶² So also R. E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (FOTL 13; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 65. For a discussion of characterization, see E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 75; S. Bar-Efrat, *The Art of Biblical Story* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Hapoalim, 1979), pp. 73–112; A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series 9; Sheffield: Almond, 1983), pp. 23–32; S. Rimmon-Kennan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New Accents; London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 33–42; M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 321–364.

⁶³ M. V. Fox, "Ethics and Wisdom," p. 86; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, p. 943.

shape the disposition of the agent in accordance with wisdom, righteousness, perception, and discernment—that is, virtue. For the sages, intellect plays an important role in ethical decisions, but intellect alone does not determine moral behavior. Rather moral character and intellect are necessary for virtuous behavior: character provides the constitutional base for the appropriation of wisdom and determines the goal of virtuous activity, while wisdom identifies the means for achieving that goal in a particular situation. This teleological thesis is the primary axiom of sapiential ethics.