The MiddleIncluded

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CHAPTER 5

Action

Logos in the Nicomachean Ethics

So far in our argumentative survey of the meanings of *logos* in Aristotle’s philosophy, we inquired, in chapter 1, into the meaning of “logos of being” as “standard” in the *Categories*, then, in chapter 2, put forward the question of its *inherence* in the context of *On Interpretation*, and finally tried to show how Aristotle’s *Physics* and *On the Soul* answer this question by exhibiting this inherence in the form of internally motivated motions in natural life (nutrition and reproduction) in chapter 3, and in animal life (sensation and locomotion) in chapter 4. We noted that these four motions brought into play a second sense of *logos*: “ratio,” and we tried to show concretely how the two major senses of *logos* in these contexts, namely “standard” and “ratio,” refer back to the basic meaning of *logos*: a relation between terms that until then were exclusive of, or indifferent to, one another. Now we shall move on to the human world in order to see how, after natural motion, human action exemplifies the inherence of humans’ “standard of being” in the specifically human sense of “reason” here in chapter 5, and of “speech” in chapter 6.

Accordingly this chapter shall deal with ethics, *ëthikê*, and will be structured around three interrelated concepts: habit (ëthos), positive state (hexis), and character (ëthos). In section 1, “Habit,” we shall present Aristotle’s analysis of the human soul as tripartite, and draw its implications with regard to habituation and imitation. In section 2, “Positive State,” we shall show that, beyond habit, Aristotle is in need of the concept of “positive state” to account for human virtue, especially intellectual virtue which is a “positive state with logos.” Finally, in section 3, “Character,” we shall see how moral virtue, a “positive state according to logos,” exhibits itself in human action.

“The human being alone among animals has logos.” What exactly does the verb for “to have” (ekhein) mean in this sentence? In what sense is *logos* something humans have? And how does *logos* interact with the rest of the human soul, especially desire? The following passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* on human desire gives us the clue:
The appetitive part or the desiring part in general somehow par-
takes [in logos] insofar as it listens to and can obey it in the sense in
which we say “taking account [ekhein logon] of both one’s father and
one’s friends.” (*NE* I, 13, 1102b29–1102b32)\(^1\)

The specifically human way in which we are able to take account of our
friends as well as our father will lead us into the specifics of human discourse
and communication in the following and last chapter of this book, chapter 6.

1. Habit

We already saw, above in chapter 3, that living nature, according to Aristotle,
is governed by desire, the desire for reproduction:

> The most natural work for living beings . . . is to make another like
itself: an animal making an animal, a plant a plant, so that they may
partake in the eternal and divine in the way they can. For all things
desire that, and do everything they do by nature for the sake of it.

(*DA* II, 4, 415a23–415b2)\(^2\)

In compensation for the limitations and mortality in the sublunar region,
the most profound natural impulse is to reproduce and thus to *be in* another
being having the same form.

The same holds true in humans, except that humans manage to *be in*
another not only by giving birth to an offspring, but by continuously *acting*,
*making*, and *doing* things to their offspring long time after they are born.\(^3\) For
humans, giving birth is only the beginning of giving life, and “reproduction”
is coupled with a subsequent and lengthy “production” of the self-sufficient
and mature human individual.

Every artist loves his own work more than he would be loved
by the work if it were ensouled . . . The reason for this is that all
things desire and love to be; and it is in actuality, in living and act-
ing, that we *are*; and, being actually at work, the maker is in a way
the work; so he loves the work and thereby loves to be. (*NE* IX, 7,
1167b34–1168a9)

Hence humans’ attachment to their children is an attachment not only to
something they simply *are at work in*, not only to their humble chance for
eternity, but also to a product *and* a project they *work at.*
As to the perspective of children, on the other hand, being “objects” of such attachment, “products” of such long effort, and “projects” involving such continuous care, they take on not only the look of their species and of their parents, but also their invisible aspects: their values, their emotions, their behavior, their accents, their fears, and even their unrealized potentials. Parents then may well succeed in being in their offspring and speak from within their children the words they were looking for all their life. This inheritance is so immediate that it can be recognized by children neither as an inheritance, nor as an inheritance among possible others.

But there is a twist, at least for Aristotle. Paradoxically, it is precisely when parents finally are in their offspring, precisely when they speak and act from within their children, that the latter start being what they were supposed to be all along: self-sufficient and independent mature beings; not only bundles of natural traits and environmental effects and internalized habits (ethos), but characters (êthos) with balanced ways (hexis) of bearing themselves in relation to different situations—not only the heirs of their parents, but friends to others in much larger contexts and projects than those of the household, and sometimes in brutal conflict with it. The children’s desire fulfills itself not simply by keeping on being what they already are, namely products of the desire of their parents, but by no longer being with them, by being with others, by being exposed to a realm of experiences and perspectives they never had firsthand, by listening to others and by earning recognition from them. The project of human parents is fulfilled when the child becomes a subject among non-parents. It is this development of human desire through her familial circle into a necessarily open environment that we shall explore here.

An Unpractical Syllogism

Somehow, human desire can “listen” in the sense of “taking account” (logon ekhein). For now let us make a textual remark concerning the way this listening and taking account takes place in our focal passage from the Nicomachean Ethics: houtô dé kai tou patros kai tôn philôn phamen ekhein logon (NE I, 13, 1102b31–33). We translated this ambiguous clause as “[the desiring part of the human soul listens to logos and can obey it] in the sense in which we say ‘taking account [ekhein logon] of both one’s father and one’s friends.’” We did so in order to emphasize what appears to be an emphatic conjunction (kai . . . kai . . .). Some translators, however, generally leave the conjunction unemphatic. Some even translate it as a disjunction. As arguing for a fundamental meaning of logos characterized by inclusiveness, we shall show that this ambiguous conjunction has significant implications insofar as it allows us to negotiate between an uncritically “rationalistic” definition of human
beings by *logos*, and an understanding of humans as “either thought infused with desire [*orektikos nous*] or desire infused with thinking through [*orexis dianoëtikê*]” (*NE* VI, 2, 1139b5–7). Insofar as it can “listen,” instead of merely saying, obeying, or dictating, human desire is infused with thinking through, or conversely, human sensation, imagination, memory, or thinking in general is infused with desire. Either way, the human soul is defined as an improbable inclusion, as an infusion, and even perhaps a certain confusion. Hence, whereas the “practical syllogism” applied to animal locomotion involved the subsumption of the particular premise of sensation under the universal premise of desire by means of a middle term, in the case of the human soul the particular sensuous premise is fundamentally complicated in that humans are capable of a certain hearing, that they are in a position both to interpret and to have interpreted the particular situations in contrary ways. Instead of being a univocal object of pleasure and pain, one and the same particular may well be conducive to good as well as to bad in the eyes of human beings, and conversely the human good is such that it may well lie in this particular action or in its contrary.

In chapter 2, we saw that Aristotle specifies these two-sided potentialities as “potentialities with *logos*” (*On Int.* 9, 13; *Metaph.*, IX, 2, 5). Regardless of whether we here translate and interpret *logos* as “reason,” it is no coincidence that these potentialities instantiate the central meaning of *logos*: the human soul not only holds together the universal and the particular in order to literally spill immediately (*euthus*) into locomotion, but it also holds possible contrary interpretations of the particular sensible or imagined object, and thus exhibits not only a motion or change, but action. “We see that the source of that which will be is also something relying on deliberation and action” (*On Int.* 9, 19a7–8). The practical syllogism of animal locomotion takes the “unpractical” form of *praxis* in the human realm. To understand human action, we indeed must first take a look at the specificity of the human soul it originates from.

**A Tripartite Soul**

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle’s criterion for dividing the human soul is *logos*: “one part is *alogos*, while the other has [*ekhon* *logos*]” (*NE* I, 13, 1102a29–30). *Logos* not only distinguishes the human being from all other animals, it also differentiates the human soul within itself. For the time being, it seems as if both the world and the human soul are somehow infused with *logos*, but neither is so through and through.

Yet the analysis of the human soul necessitates a further distinction beyond the distinction between the *alogos* part and the part having *logos*. Nutrition
and growth are simply *alogos* (*NE* I, 13, 1102a33–1102b1). They are activities of sleep at least as much as of waking, digestion being the cause of sleep (*On Sleep and Waking* 3, 456b17–18; 458a27–28). But there is another part of the human soul besides this *alogos* part as well as the one that has *logos*. This third part is somehow intermediary between the two:¹¹ “some other nature that, while being *alogos*, in a way partakes [*metekhousa*] in *logos*” (*NE* I, 13, 1102b13–14).

This intermediary part is said to sometimes “fight against and resist *logos*” in a way the purely *alogos* part does not (*NE* I, 13, 1102b17–18). If there is an intermediary part of the human soul such that it “has” *logos* but can resist and fight it, this “having” (*ekhein*) cannot take the form of *syn-ekheia*, mere continuity or adherence. But further, if this *ekhein* takes the form of *met-ekhein*, of “partaking” (*metekhousa*), as in the quotation above, Aristotle insists that this is not exact or clear enough by adding: “in a way,” “somehow” (*NE* I, 13, 1102b13–14; *NE* I, 13, 1102b29–1102b32). How then does this intermediary part *have* *logos* such that this relation is neither a mere fusion (*syn-ekheia*) nor exactly an external and intermittent participation (*met-hexis*)?²¹²

Although Aristotle explicitly leaves open the nature of the distinction between the “parts” of the soul, it is clear that the human soul, for him, can be neither monolithic nor simply heteroclite.¹³ In other words, given that one part of the human soul can *resist* another part, the human soul cannot be a Cartesian *res cogitans*, since in that case there would be nothing in the human soul to resist *logos*. Indeed, it cannot be a *res extensa* either, since then there would be no *logos* to resist to begin with. Finally, the human soul cannot be some conjunction of a *res extensa* and a *res cogitans* either, since the two parts, although somehow adjacent, would have nothing to do with one another. The Cartesian mind and body are “metaphysical neighbors,” so to speak, in comparison to the Aristotelian tripartite model of the human soul: they are born so far from one another that they are certainly not relatives, and they live infinitely far from one another so that they never come across one another and become friends or enemies except by means of an external occasionalism. To put it in another way while using this time a Hobbesian terminology, if human action is the result of a process involving resistance or listening in the soul, then action can be reduced neither to involuntary motion, nor to a voluntary motion which is, as it were, the “psychic servant” of the former.¹⁴ Unlike the Cartesian model, the human being has one regime for Aristotle. Unlike the Hobbesian model, this regime cannot be merely a despotism according to these passages in Aristotle.

In Aristotle, if the human soul has parts, they are three in number. And two of these parts are not put side by side, but set in tension against one
another: “while we see the erratic member [in a spasm] in bodies, we do not in the case of the soul” \((NE, I, 13, 1102b22–23)\). This tripartite structure makes it such that the human soul is capable of a special kind of spasm, an erratic but “invisible” stretch, reminiscent of the kinds of stretch we noted in the previous parts of this book. Yet here the stretch can take the form not only of tension, but of explicit resistance, obstinacy, and fight, or explicit adherence and consonance. And even these latter terms are inadequate because they are supposed to explain human phenomena by means of physical phenomena, suggesting that the intermediary part sticks to (Latin \textit{adhaerare}) or echoes \textit{logos} (Latin \textit{consonantia}). Aristotle insists that the intermediary part can “obey” (\textit{peitharkhein} \textit{logos}).\textsuperscript{15} This “obedience” may take the form of simply executing a command, but the capacity for resistance here suggests rather the etymological sense of “hearing out”: the intermediary part is not simply determined by \textit{logos}, but rather gives ear to it, listens to \textit{logos} “in the sense in which we say ‘taking account of both one’s father \textit{and} one’s friends,’” precisely because it is able to resist it. This is not friction, but resistance (\textit{antiteinein}). It is fight (\textit{makhein}), and not clash. My sweet tooth disobeys \textit{logos} in a fundamentally different way from the consistency of my bones and sinews. Conversely, my eating habits are obedient to \textit{logos} in a way fundamentally distinct from the way the furniture in my apartment yield to my arrangement. This “tension” results from the intermediary part’s “attention” to \textit{logos}.

If then the intermediary part somehow can “obey” \textit{logos}, it is not because it immediately yields to it, but because it has “given ear” to it, it has taken it into account (\textit{logon ekhein}). The relation between obedience and audience is not only etymologically found in Latin, but emphasized in many Aristotelian texts as well as our focus text:

\begin{quote}
At least the [intermediary part] of the self-restrained person obeys \textit{[peitharkhein] logos}, and then that of the temperate and brave is best-hearing \textit{[euêkoôteron]}, for all harmonize \textit{[homophônei]} with \textit{logos}. It appears that the \textit{alogos} [part in the human soul] is twofold. For the vegetative part does not share in \textit{logos} at all, whereas the appetitive part or the desiring part in general somehow partakes \textit{[in logos]} insofar as it listens to \textit{[katêkoon]} and can obey it \textit{[peitharkhikon]} in the sense in which we say “taking account \textit{[ekhein logon]} of both one’s father and one’s friends.” \((NE I, 13, 1102b27–33)\)\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Our translation tries to render the strong emphasis on the argumentative, almost forensic and political, environment of the human soul, because we
are trying to highlight the fact that, for Aristotle, the human soul is distinguished neither by being simply rational, nor by having a rational and an irrational part that lay side by side or are mixed indifferently, but by its inclusion of an explicit relation between its parts, of a realm where they confront one another, where they may well explicitly resist and fight one another, make compromises or come to a consensus. As distinct from dualistic or monistic conceptions of the human soul, Aristotle’s tripartite human soul resembles an agora.

Whereas animal sensation is subtended by intermediary degrees of pleasure and pain, the human soul then has an intermediary part. Human receptivity of particulars entails an act of questioning, a task of interpretation, and thus an environment of negotiation. A knife, a retreat in battle, a glass of wine, a payment, lumber, hemlock: the sensation, memory, or imagination of these particulars does not necessarily spill into an immediate evaluation as to the degree of pain and pleasure they may entail and a consequent motion; they also trigger what Aristotle compared to the attention one lends both to one’s father or friends. Hindering the smooth and immediate functioning of the “practical syllogism” of animal locomotion, it is this possibility of attention of the intermediary part that will assume a central function in the emergence of human action.

A Kind of Learning
What then is “in” the intermediary part? Potentialities? No. In chapter 3, we saw how the soul is an already developed state of a body having life potentially, and how it is indeed by nature that the human soul has these potentialities ready to work:

> Whatever grows by nature in us is bestowed on us first as potentialities, we display their actuality later. This is clear with the senses: we did not acquire the senses by repeatedly seeing or hearing, but the other way around: having them, we used them; we did not get them by using them. (*NE* II, 1, 1103a27–31)

Besides the vegetative part, human action and life are characterized by the two other parts, and as Aristotle continues we see that their development involves an almost opposite process:

> [These] perfections, we acquire by first putting them to work, just as we do other arts. For the things that one who has learned them needs to do, we learn by doing, just as house-builders become
so by building houses or harpists by playing the harp. (NE II, 1, 1103a31–1103b1)

Whereas one becomes capable of sight through an embryonic development of not seeing at all, one becomes a harpist by playing the harp.

What then does the intermediary part of the human soul have, if not potentialities? Habits. How do habits come to be? Instead of the word “habituation,” Aristotle typically uses the verb *manthanesthai*, or the noun *mathēsis*, “learning,” as in the following famous passage:

By nature, then, all animals have sensation; from this, some acquire memory, some do not. Accordingly the former are more intelligent and more capable of learning [*mathētikōtera*] than those that cannot remember. The [animals] that cannot hear sounds [*tôn psophôn akouein*] are intelligent but cannot learn [*aneu tou manthanein*], such as a bee or any other kind of animal that might be such. Whatever animal has this sense besides memory learns [*manthanei*]. (Metaph. I, 1, 980a28–980b26)

The capacity to learn, unlike intelligence, requires what Aristotle calls the “hearing of sounds” besides memory. Which animals are capable of “hearing sounds” and thus of being taught and of learning, and thereby of being formed by habits? One answer is found in the *Parts of Animals*: “all [birds] use their tongues also as a means of interpretation [*pros hermēneian*] with one another, and some to a larger degree than other, so that there even seems to be learning among some” (*PA* II, 17, 660a35–660b2). A more specific answer is found in the *History of Animals*:

Among small birds, while singing some utter a different voice than their parents if they have been reared away from the nest and have heard [*akousōsin*] other birds sing. A hen nightingale has before now been seen to teach [*prodidaxousa*] her chick to sing, suggesting that song does not come by nature as *dialektos* and voice does, but is capable of being shaped [*plattesthai*]. (HA IV, 9, 536b14–18)

Aristotle emphasizes that learning here, as a process of acquiring habit, stems from the animal’s environment, and not necessarily from its natural parents. The intermediary part of the human soul then includes habits, and these latter are generated not as natural potentialities are, but they are literally shaped.
by the environment. And “hearing sounds” is precisely hearing them for the sake of not only remembering them, but repeating them.

A Kind of Imitation
One can see the extent of learning in the sense of acquiring habits: it is imitation.20

Generally there seems to be two causes of the poetics, both natural: for imitation is innate to human beings from childhood (and they are distinguished from other animals in that they are the most imitative and do their first learning through imitation), so also is it natural that they all take pleasure in imitations. A sign of this is what happens in the way we act: for we take pleasure in contemplating the most precise images of things which we would look at with pain, such as the forms of most ignoble beasts and corpses. The reason for this is that learning [manthanein] is most pleasant not only for the philosopher, but also for everyone else—although not much is common between them. Thus humans take pleasure in seeing images because while watching they happen to learn [manthanein] and to infer [syllogizesthai] what each thing is, such as “this is that.” (Po. 4, 1448b4–17)

So humans have two natural inclinations toward imitation, both of which involve some “learning.” In the second kind of inclination, humans take pleasure in perceiving imitations—a more or less disinterested perception of a representation which, as disinterested, requires the awareness that it is indeed a representation, in order to provide the middle term of the above-mentioned syllogism: it is the commonness of shapes of the noses, and not its identity, that implies that the image is not literally (univocally or synonymously) Socrates himself, but an image of Socrates. The “learning” involved in the second case is clearly not immediate, it is “inferential” or “syllogistic.” Seeing a picture of Socrates, we seem to “infer”: this two-dimensional image has a snub nose and such and such a forehead and beard, but Socrates has the same features, so this is an image of Socrates, homonymously speaking this is Socrates.21

In the first kind of inclination, however, humans themselves imitate and do their first learnings in this way. This kind of imitation is not described as requiring an “inference” or “figuring out” (syllogizesthai). Here imitation seems to be mere immersion, and to always start out so for Aristotle. The bird
that imitates a song does not do so as an imitation. She mirrors rather than she represents; she repeats rather than she forms an analogy or syllogism; she echoes rather than she infers. This natural inclination to imitate brings it about that humans, but also small birds, are naturally inclined to acquire and reproduce behavior that are not innate to them. Here is prefigured a natural tendency to precisely transform the “innate.” So, where then do habits come from, unlike the innate potentialities of the vegetative part? From the environment.

The Limitation of Ethos

Thus, the acquisition of habits takes the form of a learning through mere imitation. While the vegetative part of the soul at birth is ready to do its own work, the intermediary part is naturally ready to do what others do. While nature takes care of the reproduction of the life form and the corresponding development of the vegetative faculties, after that, nature leaves the care of the “reproduction” of the rest to the living being’s environment. “And in all the other skills people do not generally know their tools and their most accurate reasonings by taking them from primary things; they take them from what is secondhand or thirdhand or at a distant remove, and get their reasonings from experience.” Indeed, “a human being generates a human being” by nature, but it is by learning that a certain song survives across generations.

In a way the tendency to imitate is the reverse of sensation: instead of receiving the form of external objects as in sensation, the imitating animal is impregnated by them, she “reproduces” them in her body, and she “becomes” them, so to speak. Imitation is almost a regression from sensation back into nutrition and reproduction. In fact, children’s surprising capacity for remembering is often likened to the capacity for absorption of a sponge, or to a fertile soil. Perhaps this is why, for Aristotle, “whether one is habituated from childhood this way or that way makes no small difference, but rather a great difference, or rather all the difference” (NE II, 1, 1103b23–25). Between nature and logos, then, the intermediary part acquires habits by means of learning, which takes the form of imitation or immediate repetition.

Yet how does this fit our guiding passage? Does habit match the kind of “taking account” (ekhein logon) of both one’s father and one’s friends? As we saw, the bird can learn the songs she hears from other birds no less than from her natural parents. Yet if humans took account of others merely in the sense of imitating them, Aristotle would not insist that the desiring part “gives ear” to logos. And if humans took account of anybody, regardless of whether they are our fathers or friends, then he would not mention the latter two, but say
“others” as in the end of On the Soul (DA III, 13, 435b24–26). Is it exact to say that, to return to Aristotle’s examples, house building and harp playing are habits?

The kind of “having” (ekhein) which characterizes our having logos as humans and our taking account of our fathers and friends then does not seem to be fully captured by “habit,” ethos. Habit takes us beyond the fulfillment of innate potentialities into the realm of the intermediary part of the human soul, and yet it does not appear to be the form of having that lends insight into the way humans have logos. Precisely because “taking account,” logon ekhein, does not mean here reproduction or imitation, but “esteem,” “consideration,” “value,” “regard.”23 The intermediary part of the human soul has the ability to resist logos and therefore has the ability to obey logos because it “respects” logos—again, not as blindly following it, but in the meaningful etymological sense of “respect” as “looking back” at it. In animal life, we saw sight as a kind of distant perception; here we see another kind of looking, a looking back, reminiscent of the “back-turning stretch,” oriented toward “both one’s father and one’s friends.”

Habit is indeed a crucial part of the human life and education, and yet it cannot account for the relationship between the intermediary part of the human soul and logos.

2. Positive State

A New Kind of Listening

If not habit, what does the intermediary part of the human soul “have” such that it can listen to logos? Besides the above-quoted passage from the Metaphysics that enables us to distinguish human beings and some animals from, say, bees, by the criterion of “hearing sounds,” and consequently of habituation, learning, and imitation, we now need to make a further step in order to gain insight into specifically and essentially human growth. We shall do so by introducing here a helpful passage from the Politics, VII, which is unfortunately much less quoted than the famous logos passage from book I:

There are three things by which human beings are made good and serious; these three are nature, habit and logos. For first one must be born a human and not any other animal, thus must have a certain body and soul. But there are some qualities that are of no use to be born with, for our habits make us revert them; in fact by nature some are liable to become for the worse or for the better by habits. So other animals mostly live by nature, some do so to a small
extent by habits too; but the human being lives by *logos* as well, for only the human being has *logos*. So that these [three] must be harmonized [*symphônein*]. For human beings often act contrary to habituation and nature because of *logos*, if they are persuaded [*peisthôsin*] that some other way of acting is better. Now, we have already delimited the natural property of those who are to be amenable to the hand of the legislator. The work left to do is education [*paideia*], for humans learn some things by being habituated, others by listening [*akouontes*]. (*Pol.* VII, 12, 1332a38–1332b11)24

What is this latter and specifically human kind of listening or hearing distinct not only from hearing as mere sensation (*akoê*), but also from the “hearing of sounds” (* tôn psophôn akouein*) required for a “learning” in the sense of mere habituation and imitation? Is this the kind of listening that the intermediary part is capable of with respect to *logos* “in the sense in which we say ‘taking account of both one’s father and one’s friends’”? Let us start out by negative results that may narrow down the field. Aristotle’s tripartite analysis of the human soul here defies many classical dichotomies such as rational and irrational, nature and nurture, activity and passivity. For the intermediary part here is neither a reservoir of natural potentialities nor a receptacle of habits. The human soul is no more divided between desire and thought, between active parts and passive parts, between innate motions and environmental stimuli. It is no more split between nature and nurture than between the rational and the irrational.25 Just as the latter dichotomy lacks the intermediary part, the former seems to eliminate and reduce *logos* altogether. The latter dichotomy omits “childhood” while the former omits “maturity.” Thus, these classical dichotomies disable us from understanding the human soul according to Aristotle.

It is exactly here that we shall see the function of *logos*: “For human beings often act contrary to habituation and nature because of *logos*, if they are persuaded that some other way of acting is better” (*Pol.* VII, 12, 1332b6–8). If there is to be *both* a childhood and a maturity, *both* the development of the intermediary part *and* that of the part having *logos*, the human soul must not be analyzed into acquired habits and/or natural impulses all the way down. Here *logos*, presumably in the sense of “reason,” precisely is a third factor or an “included middle” that defies seemingly exclusive dichotomies. Accordingly, habits cannot remain quantifiable atomic stimuli and thus be simply contrasted to innate “faculties.” Habits cannot be simply accumulated in the way fire can grow without limit or *logos*. There must be something *formed* out of habits.
What then does human action involve that is irreducible both to natural motion and to passively undergoing and repeating? On the one hand, natural potentialities of the soul are reserved to the vegetative part. And, as we have seen in chapter 3, these are developed organs ready for work. On the other hand, habits as passive exposure (paskhein) to, and immediate repetition of, environmental influences (pathê) cannot resist or obey logos, they repeat without listening or taking account (logon ekhein). What then does emerge in the intermediary part? What does human education involve that is neither a potentiality actualized at birth, nor internalized firsthand experience? If it is neither syn-ekheia, nor met-hexis, then what is the substantive form of ekhein in relation to logos that makes sense of being compared to one’s taking account of “both one’s father and one’s friends”?

**Positive State**
The answer is hexis, which we shall translate as “positive state” for lack of a better rendering.

In a word, from similar actualities [energeiôn] positive states [hex-eis] come to be. Hence it is necessary to make out actualities to be of certain sorts, for the positive states follow from the differences among these. (NE, II, 1, 1103b22–24)

Positive states are the basic constituents of the intermediary part of the human soul. Beyond mere habit (ethos), positive states build up human character (êthos). Neither nature, nor environment, but positive states make up human ethos, the real daimôn of human life according to Heraclitus’s fragment 119.

There are three things that come to be in the soul: feelings [pathê], potentialities and positive states . . . By feelings, I mean desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, affection, hatred, yearning, jealousy, pity, and generally those things which are accompanied by pleasure or pain. By potentialities, [I mean] those things in accordance with which we are said to be apt to undergo [pathêtikoi] these, such as those by which we can feel anger or be annoyed or feel pity. By positive states, [I mean] those things in accordance with which we bear ourselves well or badly toward feelings; for instance, in relation to being angry, if we are that way violently or slackly, we bear ourselves badly, but if in a measured way, we bear ourselves well, and similarly in relation to other feelings. (NE II, 5, 1105b20–28)
This crucial passage gives us a clue as to why Aristotle defines humans as animals that neither are of a certain kind, nor do certain things, but have (ekhein) something, because this passage introduces a sense of ekhein and hexis that is deemphasized in other analyses of these terms in the Aristotelian corpus. Aristotle here explains hexis as “those things in accordance with which we bear ourselves well or badly toward feelings” (kath’ has pro ta pathê exomen eu è kakôs). Human beings do not simply undergo (paskhein) fear or confidence, they are not only influenced under (hypo) their impact, they maintain a relation to (pros) them. Human beings neither simply act (prattein) in fear or confidence, nor even are they (einaí) simply afraid or confident, they bear themselves (ekhein) well or badly in relation to these feelings. If humans are defined neither by something they are nor by something they do, but by something they have, this may well be because hexis designates a kind of having that is irreducible to something humans simply are or do.

Human beings feel anger in a way fundamentally different from the way a combustible is set on fire. Humans never literally burst in anger, fear never literally consumes their hearts, the human soul is never literally set on fire by love. Certainly, humans undergo pleasure or pain. In fact, all sensation entails pleasure or pain. But the human soul also has an aspect out of which it bears itself (ekhein) toward these feelings. This is why positive states can neither be substituted by or to habits, feelings, and natural potentialities; they “grow” out of them. Human growth is such that it involves this other growth. For Aristotle, hexis is the proper subject matter of ethics. This is why the Nicomachean Ethics is far more deeply related to the Politics than to On the Soul.

Freedom
Let us flesh out this concept of “positive state” by distinguishing it from “habit” in our previous examples. Is there a strong sense in which harp playing (a positive state) is distinct from the singing of a bird (a habit)? Both are indeed examples of those apparently paradoxical activities that we become capable of by precisely exercising. They both illustrate the way habits stick by means of repetition in distinction from natural potentialities: “Being carried down by nature, a stone cannot be habituated to be carried upwards even if one were to habituate it by throwing it upwards ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to be carried downwards” (NE II, 1, 1103a21–23). How then does harp playing differ not only from the falling of a stone or the burning of fire, but also from the singing of a bird?

How does one become not only someone who plays the harp, but a harpist? Perhaps we should ask: when does one become a harpist? When she
happens to pick up a harp and pluck its strings? Or when she is capable of perfectly repeating what the teacher plays? Or is it rather when the student no longer needs to imitate the teacher, when the student no longer needs to immediately remember all the particular instructions and all the past experiences? Just as we noted in chapter 3 that one learns a language when one “forgets” the rules, similarly one becomes a harpist when one no longer needs to follow one’s master or to be pushed by him, but “walks her own walk.” This is when one is a harpist even while not playing a harp. Similarly a house builder is someone who does not have to imitate his master, but who in fact must be able to go beyond his master in order to improvise on the particular means, materials, workers, budget, and geography, and so on in order to build each time the particular, therefore unique, house.

The settling of a positive state then is an emergence of freedom. Not a freedom from playing certain notes, but the freedom to play others instead. It is the freedom of differing without falling into contradiction, that is, without ceasing to have the exact same logos. A positive state is a result of the actualities that we become capable of by exercise. And this result at least partially transcends the preparation such that, as Aristotle says, the good shoemaker or the good general makes the best even out of bad circumstances (NE I, 10, 1101a1–5). Indeed, no harpist is only a harpist. But being a harpist does involve the human soul as a whole. For, when one is a harpist, this colors one’s eating and sleeping habits, one’s respiration and concentration, one’s daily schedule, one’s furniture and one’s house, one’s relation to one’s body and to other people, one’s career decisions, one’s way of raising children, one’s political views, and ultimately, depending on how serious the person is, one’s life as a whole. Thus it is not true that some people are more harpist than others.

**Medicine, Architecture, and Music**

Most instructive, in this context, is a famous but lengthy passage from the *Metaphysics* that subtly defends a claim that at first may seem counterintuitive: while positive states such as art or science emerge out of experience and habit, the latter two remain more general than positive states:

> While, then, other [animals] live by impressions and memories, they have a small share in experience; on the other hand, the human race also lives by art and *logismos*. In humans, experience comes out of memory, for many memories of the same thing bring to completion a potentiality for one experience . . . But art comes to be whenever out of many conceptions from experience arises
one universal judgment \[ hypoleipsis \] about similar things. For to have a judgment that this thing was beneficial to Callias when he was sick with this disease, and to Socrates, and one by one in this way to many people, belongs to experience. But the judgment that it was beneficial to all such and such people marked out as being of one form \[ tois toiosde kat’ eidos hen aphoristheisi \], when they were sick with this disease (such as sluggish or irritable people when they were feverish with heat), belongs to art. (Metaph. I, 1, 980b26–981a13)

The crucial factor is the nature of the “judgment,” whether it is a judgment of mere fact or of the cause. Indeed animals often take care of themselves quite well, and human beings may manage quite well to live just by following their feeling and the familiar judgments of traditional medicine that they have been exposed to: “Such and such a potion is good for this disease,” “Such and such a plant is poisonous,” and so on. Similarly, one may well have memorized perfectly the traditional “judgments” concerning the “appropriate” music to play at weddings, sacrifices, funerals, and so on. An experienced manual laborer may well mechanically build up such and such walls for temples and other kinds for residences, and yet the experienced person knows the what, and not the why, whereas the artisan is familiar with the why and the cause. This is why we think master craftsmen in each kind of work are more honored and know more than manual laborers, and are also wiser because they know the causes of the things they do (just some inanimate things, the others do what they do without knowing, as fire burns; the inanimate things doing each of these things by nature, but the manual laborers by habit). (Metaph. I, 1, 981a27–981b5)

Earlier in this chapter, habit was opposed to the motion of fire. In comparison to positive states, they seem quite similar.

So positive states differ equally from habit and from mere nature by their openness to the particularity of the situation: this is good for Socrates neither because it is good in general, nor simply because it worked in the past, nor even because it worked on Socrates in the past, but because now Socrates is such and such in this particular situation. In fact, in this particular, unique and unprecedented situation, Socrates may well be right in thinking that drinking poison is the right thing to do for him. This wall is to be built this way, not because that is the way walls have always been built, not because I
am told to build it that way, but because of the material, the geography, the purpose of the building, and the political significance of the building. This song is to be played this way, not because that is the way it is played by the masters, but because of the particular acoustics of the environment, the time of the day, the season of the year, but also because of the way of life it serves, the way it forms or affects the listeners of a certain kind and on a certain, unique, occasion.

In short, positive states make it possible and even necessary to go beyond the dichotomy of natural potentialities and acquired habits. Thus, human life exhibits the inherent character of its own logos, “standard of being,” by means of these positive states. It is here, at the level of positive states, that the third sense of logos shows itself: reason.

Hexion Meta Logou
It is not anachronistic to associate artistic perfection and virtue in the word “virtuoso.” And it certainly is not out of place to dwell on the example of music. Music is always a fundamental factor of education, and especially of the emotional education of children, in Aristotle as well as in Plato. Just as the building of a house or the making of a movie involves many people having different shares in the overall purpose, similarly singing to a playback or to a karaoke, conducting an orchestra, DJing in a club, involuntarily repeating an annoying tune one has heard on the radio, whistling in the street, and playing in a military band or a jazz quartet offer a variety of distributions of “knowledge” of the causes. This wide spectrum is spread between, on the one hand, a level of mechanical repetition (imitation, mere habituation, or association), and on the other hand, a level of knowledge (art or science), of the awareness of the particular, that is of the awareness that universal “recipes” do not have univocal effects on all particulars. Here we thus find a level of holding together two possible contrary ways to go in a particular situation, and a state of deliberating well about them—a positive state with logos (hexis meta logou).

The settling of a positive state is then an emergence of freedom in the sense of overcoming the exclusiveness of what presents itself initially as contrary options. As a form of human freedom from top-down applications of universal rules as well as from the sheer particularity of perceptions, our analysis of positive states with logos such as medicine, architecture and music here foreshadows what will turn out to be the essence of human logos in our next chapter: human involvement not only with one’s past firsthand experiences, or with one’s mechanical training, but with non-firsthand experience.

The intermediary part of the human soul, then, is not an aggregate of habits. Habits, feelings, experiences, memories become positive states, settled and
free ways of the human soul’s bearing itself toward the latter. For the time being, this seems to be the clue toward interpreting meaningfully and adequately our focal passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* where the intermediary part of the human soul listens to *logos* the way “we say ‘taking account [*ekhein logon*] of one’s father and one’s friends’” (*NE* I, 13, 1102b30–1102b32). It is this bearing oneself, *ekhein*, that is “crystallized” in the concept of positive state (*hexis*). Positive states are formed not by natural growth or habituation, but by education, the *other* growth required by human growth: one’s listening not only to one’s immediate surrounding, that is, to one’s “father,” whether natural or not, *but also* to those beyond, to one’s “friends”—the human soul’s having both of these tendencies at once. “Taking account” here means not only remembering and being habituated by means of firsthand experiences in the “household,” but also attending to that which one precisely *has not* or *cannot* have experienced and even *may never* experience firsthand. For the time being, it seems as if the human being *has logos* in the sense a guitarist *owns* a guitar: not the possession of an object, indeed, neither a mastery over a memorized repertoire and over general instructions, but rather an ability to bear oneself without them and beyond them.

### 3. Character

Clearly this is not enough. The concept of positive state takes us further than nature and habit in accurately describing the human soul by introducing a kind of freedom. Yet while technical and theoretical positive states may color all human experience, they certainly do not exhaust it. The intermediary part of the human soul attends both to one’s father and to one’s friends in a non-technical and nontheoretical way as well. We saw that harp playing and house building are instances of assuming a master’s or teacher’s general guidance, and then of overcoming it for the sake of freely and maturely engaging in new particular situations. And yet, while art is a positive state with *logos* (*meta logou, NE VI, 3, 1140a11*), the positive states of the intermediary part are *not* with *logos*, but rather according to *logos* (*kata ton logon*, *NE VI, 1, 1138b25–29*), or against it (*para ton logon*, *NE I, 13, 1102b24*). One’s relation to one’s master or teacher is much less intricate and profound than one’s relation to one’s father, and much less freely chosen and sustained than one’s relation to one’s friends.

**Hexis Kata Ton Logon**

We said that some people are harpists, while some are not. Yet we cannot say, in the same way, that some people are courageous while others are not.
When non-harpist adults happen to pick up a harp, they play it the way a child would, whereas cowards feel fear in a fundamentally different way than children do (NE III, 5, 1114a3ff.): in the latter case something is lacking, but in the former case something is destroyed or out of place. People do not take up their feelings and needs the way one may pick up a harp; people do not relate to one another the way they choose a harp teacher or are handed over to a master craftsman. When human beings produce, humans do things to objects. When they act, they also do things to themselves. Art and science are indeed positive states, and they were helpful in securing an aspect of the human soul distinct from both natural potentialities and acquired habits. Yet the basic constituent of human character is positive states that relate to feelings and desires that are as old as we are, and probably older than our very sense of who we are.

Hence perfection in art or production is not a perfection of the intermediary part of the soul, of human desire (NE III, 10, 1117b23–25). Art and science require that the human bear oneself in relation to objects, memories, trainings, and habits. They both do have a part in the human soul. But they are precisely too akin to logos and too detached from desire, they are “with logos” (meta logou). In art, “taking account” means not only remembering and being habituated by means of firsthand experiences in the “household,” but also attending to that which one precisely has not experienced; but the other person involved remains distant, detachable, somebody who is more or less chosen, and therefore exchangeable. The father and friends we take account of in our relation to desires and fears, on the other hand, are not simply expendable or exchangeable. There is a much stronger sense in which they are unique, noninstrumental, nonexpendable. We are so deeply implicated in them that we cannot discharge them, but rather resist them. We do not simply deliberately follow their instructions, we take account of them in a stronger or more precise sense.

Shame
There is a phenomenon that exhibits the way a hexis kata ton logon takes account of others, the kind of listening and access beyond one’s firsthand experiences: shame. “Shame is an impression concerning dishonor, and that for its own sake and not for its results” (Rh. II, 6, 1384a22–26). It is exactly here that the expression “logon ekhein” reappears: “[people] necessarily feel shame before those whom they take account of [hôn logon ekhei]” (Rh. II, 6, 1384a28–30). This sheds light on the kind of positive state of character that is more profound than one’s relation to a harp teacher or a master architect: a fault in playing the harp in itself is a fault and nothing more; but if one feels
ashamed of making that mistake before one’s teacher or an audience, it is necessarily because one takes account of them beyond and regardless of their status, one listens not to their particular instructions, but to their evaluation of oneself. The kind of listening to one’s father and friends involved in *logon ekhein* is then the necessary attendance to both as speakers and evaluators. Indeed this presence of others is not more audible than visible: “[People] feel more ashamed before those who will be always with them [*paresom- enous*] and who keep watch on them [*prosekhortas*], because in both cases they are under the eyes of others” (*Rh.* II, 6, 1384a35–38). The phenomenon of shame seems to suggest that “respect,” the sense of *logos* that prefigures rationality and speech, is a looking back, a gaze turned at the gaze of another.

After habit, and positive states as such, this is finally the correct sense of *ekhein* for understanding *logon ekhein* both in the way the desiring part “takes account of” both one’s father and friends, and in the way the human being alone “has *logos*”: it is not *hexis* alone, it is not *hexis meta logou*, not a *met–hexis*, but a *hexis kata ton logon*. Human character and its positive states, whether virtues or vices, will involve the gaze of others, their “presence,” but also the sense that these others “will always be with” oneself. This is why human character is fundamentally interpersonal and necessarily involves a project of living together. Ultimately this is why human beings are “political animals.” To have *logos* means to take account of the evaluation of others with which one has a life project, to somehow look at oneself and the world from the eyes of others, that is, from a non-firsthand point of view.

But what is this presence of others really like such that they remain with us? Because, although we do not feel to have failed a master’s teaching while making a mistake as such on our own, we do feel shame even when others are not there attending our behavior. There must be a sense in which we see others look at us without them looking at us, in which they speak to us from within without giving any orders, in which they “move us” without constantly pushing or pulling us. Just as shame does not need the physical presence of others looking at us and giving us instructions, a *hexis kata ton logon* is not a state constantly generated by others, but presents a self-sustaining structure. In a way we must specify, we carry on these others in us—and not in the sense of imitating them, but in the sense of “taking account” of their evaluation of us and thereby respecting or disrespecting them.

**Bodily Hexis**

Aristotle argues that a positive state is not an alteration. In alteration the mover is continuous with the moved, whereas in positive states it is not:
Among positive states, some are virtues, some are vices. Yet neither virtue nor vice is an alteration [alloiôsis], but virtue is a certain completion [teleiôsis tis] (for when something attains its virtue, then it is said to be complete, for then it most conforms to its nature, as a circle is complete when a circle comes to be and in the best way), and vice is its corruption and displacement [extasis]. (Ph. VII, 3, 246a11–17)

As we saw in our previous section, hexis as such is a self-sustaining structure, it is freed from being moved each time. Just as a harpist does not become one each time she picks up a harp, our character is not an agglomeration of atomic spontaneous choices or responses to atomic stimuli. “Neither the positive states of the body, nor those of the soul are alterations” (Ph. VII, 3, 246a10–11).

Bodily hexis may help us shed light on the peculiar way in which our father and friends are with us, as attested by the phenomenon of shame. “For instance, we place health and vigor in the krasis and symmetria of the hot and the cold, either in relation to themselves or in relation to their surroundings; and similarly with beauty and strength and the other virtues and vices” (Ph. VII, 3, 246b5–8). Now, in chapters 3 and 4, where we dealt with nutrition and sensation, we already thematized this “blending” (krasis) and “proportionality” (symmetria); but on this occasion, we can briefly touch upon some aspects of the specificity of human corporeality. Even at the level of merely bodily functions, virtues and vices are self-sustaining positive states. For Aristotle, “beauty,” “ugliness,” “health,” and “sickness” are not simply “properties” such that they may be simply manipulated externally, that is, altered; nor are they simply natural in the sense of innate, in which case they would be constantly “moved” or “generated” by nature as such.

Note the remarkable characterization of the body here: although a body has matter and matter can be changed, a body cannot be made beautiful or ugly by merely external manipulations. The Aristotelian body has at once a special kind of “thickness” and a “historicality.” Its beauty and ugliness has a special depth of its own, a “logic” unto itself, beyond simply the way it looks.

Thus virtues and vices are not simply a matter of sensitivity or insensitivity even at the level of merely bodily functions: “virtue makes one be insensitive [apathes] or sensitive [pathêtikon] in a certain way, while vice makes one contrarily sensitive or insensitive” (Ph. VII, 3, 246b18–20). In chapter 3 we saw how bodily health is not simply a matter of preestablished substances. The cause of health is a régime. Health depends on a diet which configures certain substances with corresponding amounts and timing, but also, precisely,
on all sorts of habits, on work conditions, on familial traits, on laws, and so on. Aristotle’s understanding of bodily excellence is at once substantive enough to avoid relativity, and particular enough to defy empty universal prescriptions. Experiential testimony for this can be found in the fundamental difficulty of generalizing medical issues, and often the need for family physicians, that is, physicians who not only deduce diagnoses and treatments from a first consultation, but who have a long-lasting acquaintance with us and our life, and even with our grandparents, that is, with us as a new emergent life within a long tradition. Physicians do not always calculate, they do not always deduce diagnoses from overarching principles, for the simple reason that they are unable to do so successfully or to do so as such. Physicians do not manipulate or “alter” our body, because they cannot always do so successfully, or because they cannot do so at all. Hence, the Hippocratic phrase, primum non nocere.

Pellegrin nicely contrasts the relative stability of Aristotelian virtue with Christian virtue:

Aristotelian virtue has nothing to do with, say, Christian virtue. The Christian saint is in no way at safety against the return of evil, and is always open to temptation. The Aristotelian wise person—just like the Platonic, Stoic and Epicurean—finds his happiness in virtue, even if happiness secondarily depends on external conditions. A person who represses his bad desires with more or less pain, the “restrained” person in Aristotle’s terms, may well look virtuous externally, yet he is not so. Hence two Aristotelian claims, among others, which set his ethics apart from Christian or Kantian morality: first, the sense of modesty (aidôs) is not a virtue, for the accompanying shame is foreign to the virtuous. And secondly, pleasure is the genuine criterion of a virtuous act and enables us to distinguish it from forgeries.

Thus, being neither a temporary affection, nor an ingrained habit, a positive state exhibits a relative stability that makes it meaningful to talk about virtue and character in ethics.

Moral Virtue
Aristotle extends his analysis of virtue and vice from the context of the body to that of the intermediary part of the soul, the seat of pleasures and pains. There we see the same irreducibility of positive states to habits and alterations in an even richer form:
Similarly with the positive states of the [intermediary part of the] soul, since all of them consist in holding oneself in relation to something in a certain way \([pros\ t\i\ p\os\ e\k\he\in]\), and while virtues are completions \([teleia\seis]\), vices are displacements \([extaseis]\). \((Ph.\ VII,\ 3,\ 246b21–247a2)\)

Positive states are neither feelings such as pleasure or pain, nor sensations which are always accompanied by the latter:

All moral virtue concerns bodily pleasures and pains . . . while pleasures and pains are alterations of the perceptive part, it is clear that something must be altered both for these to be cast off and for them to be taken on. Therefore, the generation of them [of virtues and vices] is with alteration, but they are not alterations. \((Ph.\ VII,\ 3,\ 247a7–19)\)

Just as excesses destroy the sense organs, and ultimately health as such, the same thing holds true for the temperance and courage and other virtues; for the man who runs away from everything in fear and never endures anything becomes a coward; the man who fears nothing whatsoever but encounters everything becomes rash . . . Temperance and courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency, and are preserved by the mean. \((NE\ II,\ 2,\ 1104a18–27)\)

What is universal about courage is that it will involve confrontation and avoidance thereof. Because, in each case, courage will involve one’s fear. But the object of the fear confronted and the specific way in which confrontation might happen is not universal at all; on the contrary, it is always particular, and therefore always requires a creative act, that is, an act originating from the subject in the uniqueness of his being, situation, and history.

This parallelism between bodily virtues and moral virtues may remind the reader of our discussion of sensation in chapter 4: if it is true that excess in sensation destroys the organ, sensation is a logos and requires a mean; similarly, excess in feelings destroy something in the human soul. We must clarify what is meant by “mean” or “excess” in this context, just as the same problem showed up in our discussion of sensation. The destruction of a sense organ is the destruction of its logos, of its ability to hold together contrary sensuous qualities (hot and cold, wet and dry); in other words, while the excess of heat in iron simply moves it further and further away from the cold toward more and more heat, excess of heat in a hand makes it insensitive to both cold \(and\)
heat. The meaning of *logos* as “ratio,” in the context of sensation as well as in that of the moral virtues, is not simply a matter of percentage, of quantity, of fine-tuning, but a matter of holding contraries together. But while growth holds on to actual contrary elements, and sensation holds on to actual contrary states, the human agent holds contrary possibilities. Virtue stems from the fact that the human agent is open to possible contrary interpretations of particular sensations. This seems to be the key point that so crucially distinguishes virtue from apathy or insensitivity:

Humans become corrupted through pleasures and pains, either by pursuing or avoiding them at the wrong time or in the wrong manner or in as many ways as such things are delimited by *logos*. This is also why some define the virtues as certain kinds of apathy or calmness, but they do not define them well because they say this simply but do not add “as one ought” and “as one ought not” and “when” and the rest. (*NE* II, 3, 1104b21–28; emphasis ours)

Both the virtuous and the vicious person act in relation to pleasures and pains, both feel them. Both the courageous and the coward feel fear, and what distinguishes the soul of the former is that it is not only occupied by fear, that it takes account of the particularity of the situation, and not only of its own emotional state or habits, of its history or present situation. The virtuous person then “listens to *logos*” by holding its emotional state together with contrary interpretations of the situation. In a sense, the virtuous person is defined not by less, but by more sensitivity—not perhaps to the pleasure and pain, but to the various and more comprehensive ways of interpreting them.

This holding together of contrary interpretations can be seen indirectly by its result: *proairesis*, “choice,” literally “a taking out [*hairesis*] of one of the interpretations in favor [*pro*].” In fact, this holding together typical to all the senses of *logos* we have seen so far here goes back to the oldest sense of *logos* and *legein*: collecting, laying down one beside another. And *proairesis* as a “taking out” or “picking” is precisely the result of this laying down. It is because *logos* holds together differences in their difference that *proairesis* as picking is not simply taking what it given, but taking out, taking from out of what is given, a choosing one option for the exact same reason (*logos*) one refuses the other option(s). Choice happens only out of a simultaneous openness to a manifold of options, and thus only for a reason for choosing this rather than that, that is, only because of an interpretative deliberation between this and that. Hence these options are not different amounts of desire or fear, but different interpretations of the same particular object.
Thus we come to finally make sense of the meaning of *logos* in the expression “rational potentiality” (*dynamis meta logou*) we encountered in *On Interpretation* in our chapter 2: humans are exposed to contrary options because they hold on to contrary interpretations of situations or objects or projects. If Socrates can both walk and not walk out of jail, this is because Socrates has devoted his life to cultivate the ability to interpret the situation of walking away from prison in contrary ways, unlike Crito urging him to run out of jail.\(^{39}\) This “motion” is what is called action (*praxis*) in the strict sense. “*Logos goes both ways ([amphoin esti]),* but not in the same manner; it is in the soul which has a source of motion, and will therefore, by the same source, set both in motion linking them ([*synapsasa*]) to the same *logos*” (*Metaph.* IX, 2, 1046b21–23).

**Deliberation**

As we said, this holding together of contrary interpretations can be seen indirectly by its result: *proairesis,* “choice,” but also more directly by the very process of interpretation. Aristotle does not use the usual term for “interpretation” in Ancient Greek, namely, *hermeneia,* but that of “deliberation,” *bouleusis.*

Because of its openness to the particularity of human situations, Aristotle’s ethics is fundamentally irreducible to universal prescriptions and to quantitative measurements. Just as virtue is irreducible to apathy because of the latter’s indifference to the particularity of the situation, defining virtue as an arithmetical mean (such as 6 being the mean of 10 and 2) is a fundamentally distorted way of looking at the human soul:

> But the mean in relation to us is not something one needs to take in this way, for it is not the case, if ten pounds is a lot for someone to eat and two pounds a little, that the gymnastic trainer will prescribe six pounds, for perhaps even this is a lot for the one who is going to take it, or a little. (*NE* II, 6, 1106a36–1106b5)

The mean, or the *logos,* is not measured, but deliberated according to the particular person and her situation. What is measured, according to Aristotle, is vice, precisely because vice is an excess away from virtue, which is a standard in itself. Bringing together “choice,” “mean in relation to us,” and indeed *logos,* moral virtue is finally defined as follows: “a positive state that makes one apt at choosing, consisting in a mean condition in relation to us, which is determined by *logos* and by the means by which a person with practical judgment ([*phronimos*]) would determine it” (*NE* II, 6, 1106b36–1107a2). Both desire and
intellect are in fact without logos. And neither as such characterize human beings. It is their togetherness, their interpenetration that characterizes logos and defines human beings. It must be recognized that even if Aristotelian ethics epitomizes divine théoria or the contemplative life, nevertheless his account of moral, that is, strictly human, virtue gives utmost importance to the particularities of human life. For Aristotle, this is intrinsic to ethics:

But let this be granted in advance—that all logos concerning actions is obliged to speak in outline and not precisely, just as we said at the beginning that one ought to demand that logoi be in accord with their material, whereas matters that are involved in actions and are advantageous have nothing static about them, any more than do matters of health. And the general logos being like this, still more does the logos concerning particulars lack precision; for it falls under no art nor under any skill that has been handed down, but it is necessary for those who are acting to always look at the circumstances surrounding the occasion, just as is the case with the medical art or the art of steering a ship. (NE II, 2, 1103b36–1104a11)

Both “gut feelings” and general prescriptions fail to circumscribe the origin of moral virtue, the former being stuck with an unaccountable particular emotional or bodily state, the latter with an empty rule to apply. The former leave no room for listening and thus resemble habit, whereas the latter are unable to listen to the particularity of the situation human life is always confronted with. The former repeats, and the latter dictates, whereas moral virtue for Aristotle must take the form of taking account of others. If the human soul holds together contrary interpretations of one situation, it is because the human being is able to see another as herself (for “a friend is another self,” NE IX, 4, 1166a32), but also because the human being can see herself as another, and thus can be a friend to herself (NE IX, 8, 1169a12). As the individual human being is a “political animal” according to Aristotle, friendship turns out to be a virtue in a special sense. (NE IX, 4, 1166a1ff.) In the next chapter, we shall see better how human logos is precisely this perceptiveness in regard to others’ experiences.

Logos in the context of positive states and human character then blurs the apparent exclusivity of contrary actions, the externality of others, and a monolithic view of the integrity of the human individual. As the prudent person interprets apparently similar situations in contrary ways and apparently different ones as the same, the intermediary part of the virtuous person takes account of both one’s father and one’s friends not only in the sense of seeing
them see oneself, but in the sense of being able to intimately assume their point of view and “listen to them” while making decisions and deliberating in situations of which one has no firsthand experience.

Circles Vicious and Virtuous
The necessarily imprecise character of ethics thus makes it impossible to draw inferences from particular actions to the “completions” and “displacements” that constitute virtue and vice. For instance, someone writing a Ph.D. dissertation knows the variety of the forms distraction can assume. Despite appearances, writing a dissertation well is fortunately not about being a good ascetic, about being a person who sharply compartmentalizes sectors of her life. The inability to concentrate does not simply mean to be unable to refrain from doing many things, from undergoing many sensations, from being constantly stimulated and excited about multifarious things. Distraction rather means to do and undergo many things as many, and not as one. It means to do and undergo many things while resetting the process with each action or passion. Vice as “displacement” refers to this necessity of resetting the process, and thus has very little to do with “evil.” Vice as “displacement” is “replacement.”

On the other hand, the term “concentration” also refers to the “circle” analogy, but this time not because it suggests routine, but because it incorporates all different points equidistant from the center. To be virtuous is to be able to go on a trip, to incorporate difference while remaining the same, whereas vice is to remain at the same place while constantly moving around. Paradoxically, a “vicious” trip is to move around, a “virtuous” trip is change and understanding. Hence being concentrated on a dissertation in philosophy in no way entails lack of interest and excitement in front of the multiplicity of actions and passions precisely because it is not an application of a rule or a report on various experiments, but, at least at first, a risk, a trip, the answering of a riddle, a question—an engagement into something that one knows that one does not know. Being concentrated here is rather being constantly interested and necessarily open without having to reset one’s interest, being excited without having to refuel one’s curiosity, doing and undergoing without having to end and restart. Distraction and concentration are examples of human phenomena that are environmental, that is, irreducible to motion and lack of motion, activity and passivity. For one who is distracted may well be standing still, but in fact he is constantly stopping and restarting.

This is why it is not enough to stand still in order to step out of the “environment” of distraction. In order to get out of this process of constant change, one cannot simply make a change. In order to unify this multiplicity,
one cannot simply add something. A child that is constantly distracted while sitting in a classroom may well become extremely concentrated while playing soccer: playing soccer creates an environment that absorbs and intensifies the soul more and more so that in the end the players are disturbed by distractions. This is why a soccer field is not a certain space in which things happen, it is the environment of those things, imbued with interpretation.

Similarly, fear is not simply an atomic feeling. For fear can “color” actions and objects, it can create environments, especially in the case of human beings which, as we shall see better in chapter 6, having logos, are able to understand and relay non-firsthand experiences as much as firsthand experiences. Fear is a perfect case for seeing the implications of the human capacity for understanding and relaying non-firsthand experiences. For, in an environment of fear in which I fear someone who fears me, I will be ready to express my fear in such a way as to set the other to do the same. But since I know that my violence will provoke his, I will be ready to do violence harsh enough to intimidate him definitively. Yet he knows this too and must feel pretty much the same way as I do. So he will be prepared to preempt my plans of definitively hardening my violence by even greater violence, and so on. It is precisely because the reign of fear is more than the sum of the individual motions or atomic feelings it contains, that it blurs the distinction between action and passion, between my feelings and those of my enemy. Consequently, sometimes, if not often, it unfortunately becomes very difficult to pinpoint any beginning of a long-lasting enmity, and also to foresee any short-term resolution.

The Dilemma of Character Painting

Just as the photographic approach to the spectacle of natural beings turned out to be fundamentally flawed above in chapter 3, here we may see why all representations of human character become fundamentally problematic. In his discussion of the aesthetic education of children, Aristotle argues that visual representations reflect character only to a small extent:

These [visual representations] are not the likenesses of characters, the forms and colors produced are rather signs of characters and these are in the bodily modifications. But so far as there is a difference concerning the contemplation of these, the young should not contemplate the works of Pauson but of Polygnotus and of any other moral [êthikos] painter or sculptor. (Pol. VIII, 5, 1340a32–38)

It is exactly these two artists that Aristotle compares in the discussion of character representation in the Poetics: “[Those who imitate] do so either as
better or as worse than us or as similar to us just like painters do: Polygnotus paints those better than us, Pauson those worse than us, while Dionysus those similar to us” (Po. 2, 1448a4–7). So, if character (êthos) defies momentary appearances, particular acts and general prescriptions, how can a painter produce a “likeness,” and not a “sign,” of a just person? How does one represent visually not an act or a feeling, but a positive state such as a virtue or vice? How does one illustrate not only a human body, but her êthos—her true daimôn according to Heraclitus?

Unlike a composer of music who, according to Aristotle, more directly speaks to our feelings and shapes our soul, painters of êthos, the “peintres de mœurs,” as it is said in French, are in a dilemma: if a painter, naively speaking, has to convey on the canvas the depth of a three-dimensional body in space, a portrait painter has to somehow project on the canvas the depth of the soul in time and history. If one’s goal is to represent a person as a character, one can limit oneself neither to a naturalistic representation of the model’s nose, eyes, mouth, and hair as an “exact” photograph would, nor to a parable or an allegory in which the figure would be subsumed under a universal virtue or sin as can be seen in, say, Brueghel’s paintings of the seven deadly sins. The representation of character should be neither merely representative nor, in this particular sense, “moralizing.”

Hence it may be easier to produce a conventional representation of Justice and to graphically reproduce the outer appearance of a just human being’s body, than to represent a just person as such. Again this is because imprecision is inherent to ethics, because human character is irreducible to universal formulas and particular acts, because there is an impossibility to represent human deliberation and interpretation, because there is an “invisibility” of the father and friends of whom the virtuous human being takes account, and in front of whom she feels ashamed, because there is a “lack of content” in their words.

Rembrandt teaches one much about how developmental and even hereditary characteristics can be paradoxically represented in a moment and two-dimensionally. One example may be his 1653 painting of Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer. According to our interpretation of character, there is no wonder that there is still controversy as to what the painting means, but also whether or not Aristotle is looking at the bust at all, and even whether the figure is Aristotle to begin with. Although he has recourse to “signs,” allegoric objects (in this case the bust, the golden chain with the medallion of Alexander the Great), biblical scenes and references, exotic clothes, and real-life situations and actions, Rembrandt’s real tool in conveying positive states is light and darkness. His contrasts attempt to find a
middle way between simply asserting the particular person in her particular time and place—say, Solon in sixth-century Athens—and making her a conventional sign of universal virtue—say, a blindfolded woman holding a balance in one hand and a sword in the other. His contrasts rather seem to be oriented towards conveying the effect that the brightness is not fully detached from the possibility of sinking back into darkness and that obscurity is pregnant. This contrast does not simply create a dramatic impression or the appearance of the depth of the soul, it allows the appearance of a status between presence and disappearance, in Aristotelian terms, between actuality and potentiality. And this is why it is able to convey the sense of a person having not only a face and an identity but also a history and a character.

So Rembrandt’s contrasts convey two contradictory impressions. On the one hand, one feels that, apart from the presence of the figure that is represented, the figure could have been somewhere else, in different clothes, in a different situation and committing a different act, and yet that it would be the same thing, that she would adapt herself and still hold the same relation to the world and to her emotions. This means that she is not confined by this particularity. On the other hand, the portrait of a magnanimous person by Rembrandt, insofar as it represents this character trait of the person, gives the impression that if somebody else were in the same situation, doing the same thing or standing in the exact same posture, it would not be the same thing. This means that she is not merely a universal idea, but a person.

Thus, at least as much as people are sources of actions, characters are constitutive of people for Aristotle. Just as an environment is more than the sum of the objects in that environment, a virtue is the environment of a soul irreducible to particular acts or general rules. The transcendence of virtue over the particular situations and general rules is at once stable and vulnerable as the transcendence of the environment over its components. The courageous person neither spontaneously repeats courage in his soul, nor does he apply a preexistent formula to his particular situation. Hexis names the very fact that there are neither virtuous acts per se, nor recipes for virtue other than that it involves an unforeseeable free relation to contrary extremes. The contrasts in Rembrandt’s portraits reflect the necessarily deliberative character of human logos, its very êthos, its holding contrary interpretations without letting one yield to or take over the other.

4. Recapitulation and Reorientation

In chapter 1, we saw that the first sense of logos is “standard of being.” In chapter 2, we saw that this standard must be inherent to the being in
question. In chapters 3 and 4, we saw that natural beings exhibit the inherence of their “standard of being” in natural motion: nutrition, reproduction, sensation and locomotion—all of which instantiate a second sense of *logos*: “ratio.” Here in chapter 5, we began seeing that human beings exhibit the inherence of their “standard of being” in human action—thus introducing the third sense of *logos*: “reason.”

Our elaboration of the source of action required an analysis of the tripartite structure of the human soul, and especially of its intermediary part. Beyond dualistic as well as monistic accounts of the human soul, Aristotle holds that this intermediary part, the “desiring part,” “somehow partakes [in *logos*] insofar as it listens to and can obey it in the sense in which we say ‘taking account’ [*ekhein logon*] of both one’s father and one’s friends” (*NE* I, 13, 1102b31–1103a3). As capable of listening to *logos*, of obeying or resisting it, this intermediary part has been shown to include not only habits (*ethos*) (section 1), but, more crucially, positive states (*hexis*) (section 2), and especially ones according to *logos* (section 3). Thus we tried to show that Aristotle construes virtue, especially moral virtue, neither merely as a natural potentiality nor as an acquired habit, but as a settled and free positive state of deliberating according to *logos*, that is, of interpreting particular situations beyond the mutually exclusive options of mere adherence and indifference. Our discussion of freedom, shame, deliberation, and character painting demonstrated the inadequacy of the exclusive options of past and present, of passivity and activity, of nature and nurture, and of self and other. Once again we came across the fundamental meaning of *logos*: a relation holding on to its terms without letting one yield, or remain indifferent, to the other.

Desire has *logos* in the sense in which we say “taking account” of both one’s father and one’s friends. Having *logos*, the human being takes account of others as herself and of herself as others—especially as “those who will always be with them” (*Rh.* II, 6, 1384a35–38). But who are they? One does not choose one’s family, and especially one’s parents, one’s “father.” But one can become a person who chooses one’s friends in the polis precisely beyond the family circle. In so far as the question of ethics depends not only on one’s father but also on one’s friends, we must move beyond the framework of the household and make our way into the horizon of the polis.