

---

---

# METEORITE

---

---

THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

*University of Michigan*  
*Ann Arbor*

SPRING 2021

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Charlotte Meltzer

MANAGING EDITORS: Veronica Sikora and Tristan Sirls

CONFERENCE AND MEDIA CHAIR: Zuzanna Lutrzykowska

EDITORIAL STAFF: Gavin Amezaga, Mrinalini Gupta, Derik Hendriksen, Andrew Kovacs, Shihua Lu, Nick Preuth, Ellen Sirower

FACULTY ADVISOR: David John Baker, Ph.D

---

*Meteorite* gratefully acknowledges the support of Judith Beck and the staff of the Tanner Library, and the faculty and staff of the University of Michigan Department of Philosophy, without whom this publication would not be possible.

*Meteorite* also expresses gratitude to Colton Karpman, former Editor-In-Chief, for his exemplary dedication to this publication.

---

All authors retain copyright on original work unless otherwise noted.

Please direct copyright inquiries and requests for back issues to:

Meteorite c/o  
Department of Philosophy  
2215 Angell Hall  
435 S. State St.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109  
USA

## Contents

<b>Is the Causal, the Teleological?.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Ongun Kılıç</i>	
<i>Koç University</i>	
<b>In Defense of the Senses:</b>	
<b>A Critique of Plato’s Epistemology in <i>Republic V</i>.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Jonah Dunch</i>	
<i>University of Alberta</i>	
<b>Temperance and Sustainability:</b>	
<b>An Argument for the Competence of Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics in</b>	
<b>Environmentalism.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>Thomas Black</i>	
<i>University of Alberta</i>	
<b><i>Zhuangzi</i>: The Fruitless Tree.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Ian Withy-Berry</i>	
<i>Swarthmore College</i>	

# Is the Causal, the Teleological?<sup>1</sup>

Ongun Kılıç  
Koç University

## Abstract

One of the first steps toward understanding others is understanding what their goals are and how their overt behavior relates to those goals. György Gergely and Gergely Csibra argue that we acquire the capacity to make sense of others' actions much earlier than expected, at around 12 months of age. According to Gergely and Csibra, infants utilize a so-called teleological stance, a tripartite analysis of the environment, in order to infer the corresponding goal of others' actions. Moreover, they argue that the adult capacity to explain others' actions in terms of mental vocabulary and causal links is simply a conceptual extension of the earlier capacity to teleologically interpret others' actions. In this paper I expound Gergely and Csibra's teleological stance, how they compare it to the adult capacity to explain others' actions causal-mentally and what they exactly mean by the relationship of a conceptual extension. I argue that we do have good reasons to reject the idea that these two capacities are related in the way they propose them to be through a discussion of the of interpretations and explanations, and lastly, how the conception of rationality, as the core principle in both of these models, undergoes a change while shifting between these two models.

## Introduction

In this paper, I will argue, contrary to György Gergely and Gergely Csibra, that we have good reasons to reject the idea that the infant capacity to teleologically represent others' actions is related to the later emerging adult capacity to mentalistically represent others' actions. In the first section I expound Gergely and Csibra's teleological stance with reference to their original habituation study conducted in 1995. I further discuss some central concepts relating to the teleological stance and try to clarify what Gergely and Csibra have in mind. In the second section I explain how Gergely and Csibra differentiate between causal mentalistic explanations from teleological explanations. This section closes by questioning how or whether these two conceptually distinct capacities are actually related as Gergely and Csibra suggest. In the third section I highlight some conceptual and mechanical differences inherent to explanations and thus their corresponding systems. Drawing from these considerations in the final section, I return to inquiring about what exactly these two systems are trying to make sense of and whether the rationality principle that has been postulated as the common core system for both these models undergoes a certain change.

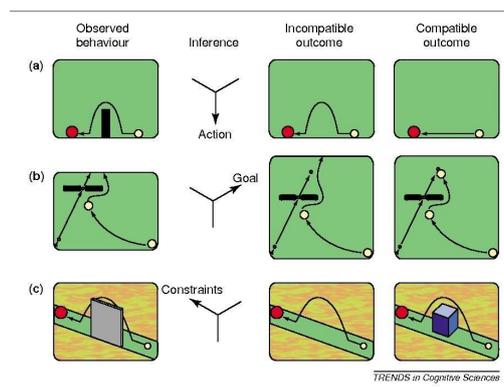
---

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Professor Stephen Butterfill for his invaluable inputs throughout this project.

## Section I: Teleological Interpretations of Action

Gergely and Csibra<sup>2</sup> conducted a habituation study indicating that infants have numerous abilities when it comes to interpreting other's actions. First, infants were habituated to an original animation, which consisted of a smaller ball making contact with a larger ball, only after bouncing over an obstacle in its path (Fig. 1.a, first column). Then, two different animations were presented to the infant: one with a compatible outcome and another with an incompatible outcome (Fig. 1.a, third and fourth column). Infants looked longer at the incompatible outcome animation, suggesting violation of expectation. There are three main points that Gergely and Csibra made following the outcome of these numerous trials. First, they took this to mean that infants are able to interpret actions as goal-directed. Perhaps Fig. 1.b is more helpful in making this point clearer, since the behaviour of the smaller ball changes between panels in Fig. 1.a, making it harder to talk about goals proper. If the infant did not regard actions as goal-directed, we would not observe violation of expectation when presenting the incompatible outcome animation in Fig. 1.b, third column. The infant was habituated to the original animation (Fig. 1.b, first column) of the larger ball making its way around the obstacle while following the smaller ball, without actually seeing them touch at the end. In turn, the infant infers that the larger ball is doing all this in order to touch the smaller ball and therefore gazes longer at the incompatible outcome animation. Second, the study indicated that infants expect agents to take the most efficient path to attain the relevant goal. That is, the infant gazes longer at the incompatible outcome animation on Fig. 1.a because the infant expects the smaller ball to take the most energy efficient path to attain its goal; instead, the infant's expectations are violated when the ball takes a longer, non-linear route to its goal. By the same token, this experiment shows that infants are able to evaluate which specific set of actions is the most efficient way of attaining a certain goal.

Figure 1:



We have seen above that infants regard others' actions as goal-directed and are able to infer what particular goals agents might have based on the agent's actions. What we

<sup>2</sup>Gergely, G. et al., 1995. 'Taking the Intentional Stance at 12 Months of Age'. *Cognition*, 56(2), pp.165–193.

haven't yet determined is *how* exactly the infant does this. Gergely and Csibra answer the *how* question by invoking what has come to be known as the 'teleological stance'. The idea is that the infant considers three different aspects of a given event in order to predict or expect a certain set of actions or goals. These aspects are as follows: (i) *situational constraints*, (ii) *actions* and (iii) *goals*. Situational constraints are the limitations of reality that push the agent to act in a certain way in order to attain their goal. For instance, the obstacle that the smaller ball encounters on Fig. 1.c, first column could be labelled as a situational constraint. Perhaps, the roughness of the surface, the diameter of the ball and the material that the obstacle is made out of are all included as variables that would make an impact on how the smaller ball acts in order to arrive at the larger ball. What is meant by action, it seems, is fairly straightforward. It is simply what the agent does, and how it does it on the face of its goal and the situational constraints of reality. The concept of goal is a bit more complicated to elucidate and requires an understanding of what the rationality principle really amounts to within the teleological stance.

To Gergely and Csibra, the infant who observes the situational constraints and the action does two main things: the infant (i) interprets action x as goal-directed and (ii) infers what exactly P's goal is in doing x. Explaining how exactly the infant is able to interpret and infer these aspects of future reality is tightly bound with the rationality principle. The rationality principle conjectures that for an action to be interpreted as a goal-directed one, the action should be 'seen as the most justifiable action towards that goal state that is available within the constraints of reality.'<sup>3</sup> Given that infants are able to discern which goal a given action is the optimal means for, one could clearly see how the infant, with the rationality principle, is able to infer what exactly the goal is. Within this perspective, it seems, we seem to have an answer to this question: how does the infant infer the goal of an action? What we don't seem to have an answer for is this: why does the infant interpret others' actions as goal-directed? Gergely and Csibra once again utilize the rationality principle to answer this question. The rationality principle, in their view, not only posits that an action be the optimal pathway, but also that the action be goal-directed. Although Gergely and Csibra do not dig much deeper on this topic, I assume that this is the fundamental point concerning actions within a so-called rationality principle.

## **Section II: Causal Mentalistic Explanations of Action and Their Alleged Relation to Teleological Interpretations**

As adults, we attribute certain mentalistic attitudes to agents when they are about to act, acting or have acted. Whenever we encounter a man chopping some wood, we do not have much problem in deriving some conclusions concerning his beliefs about wood chopping and the desires he might have that sponsor his current action. In turn, we can give certain explanations of an agent's action through reference to these mentalistic attitudes. For instance, to explain the man's action, we may infer that he is chopping wood because he *wants* to get a fire going. Gergely and Csibra<sup>45</sup> separate their teleological action interpretation model from this adult capacity that makes reference to mentalistic

<sup>3</sup>Csibra, G. Gergely, G., 1998. The Teleological Origins of Mentalistic Action Explanations: A Developmental Hypothesis. *Developmental Science*, 1(2), pp.255–259.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Gergely, G. Csibra, G., 2003. Teleological Reasoning in Infancy: The Naive Theory of Rational Action. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7(7), pp.287–292.

attitudes in explaining others' actions. This distinction they make is based on two main components: (i) temporality and (ii) criteria of acceptance.

For Gergely and Csibra<sup>6</sup>, the first point of divergence between the two models is the temporal content of the explanatory reference point. According to the teleological model of action interpretation, what justifies the action is a *future*-state, namely a goal. Within the causal mentalistic explanation model of action, on the other hand, the explanatory point of reference is a *prior* mental state. The second point of divergence Gergely and Csibra identify between these two models is how exactly these respective explanatory reference points explain the action itself. The explanatory reference point within the teleological model, i.e. the future goal-state, only provides a rational reading of the action itself; there is simply no reason to think that the action was the inevitable outcome of a certain causal chain, nor to think that this particular goal is the only goal the action could be directed at. The explanatory reference point within causal mentalistic models, i.e., the prior mental state, however, provides a certain causal chain in which the action is the inevitable result. Under this model, it is very hard to come up with different readings of an action, unlike the teleological model, since the prior mental state '*necessitates* the action providing its generative source'.<sup>7</sup>

So, what exactly is the relation between the infant capacity of teleological action interpretation and the adult capacity of causal mentalistic action explanation? Gergely and Csibra argue that the adult capacity to explain actions in a causal mentalistic manner is an extension of the infant capacity to interpret actions in a non-mentalistic manner.<sup>8</sup> This extension Gergely and Csibra propose conserves the 'core inferential principle'—the rationality principle—while transforming the aspects that the observer utilizes. Remember how the infant taking the teleological stance considers the situational constraints and the action utilizing the rationality principle, in turn inferring a goal-directed action. Gergely and Csibra argue that, although the rationality principle is conserved within the causal mentalistic model of action explanation, the situational constraints and the concept of goals within the teleological model are 'fictionalized and mentalized'.<sup>9</sup> This transforms situational constraints into *beliefs*, and goals into *desires*, thus shifting the model into a causal mentalistic one.

### **Section III: Explanations, Interpretations and Conceptual Extension**

Here, I wish to talk about my labeling of the teleological stance as a model of action *interpretation* and labeling of the causal mentalistic stance as a model of action *explanation*; this discussion, I presume, will help us in making it explicit how, if at all, these two capacities are related in the way Gergely and Csibra proposed. When we talk about explanations, we seem to aim for a clear-cut case of why the phenomenon exactly occurred, without considering any alternative routes; however, it seems like interpretations are more similar to what we would call descriptions, or redescriptions. Whenever we try and interpret a phenomenon, we aim for one reading of that very

---

<sup>6</sup>Csibra, G. Gergely, G., 1998. The Teleological Origins of Mentalistic Action Explanations: A Developmental Hypothesis. *Developmental Science*, 1(2), pp.255–259.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.* p.256

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.* p.258

phenomenon that is consistent with the governing paradigm<sup>10</sup> that we take to be the criteria within that interpretive model. Since a certain interpretation or redescription of a phenomenon does not aim to give an exhaustive account of it, they also need not be the one and only way of making sense of that very phenomenon. Another point of divergence between these two notions is the commitment that they exhibit towards the governing paradigm. An explanation need not have or use a governing paradigm in order to make sense of a phenomenon. It also posits no problems if a given phenomenon is inexplicable by the inner workings of those principles. On the other hand, an interpretation does not seem to be as flexible. If a certain phenomenon fails to fit the governing paradigm that the model of interpretation takes dear, the model simply fails to make sense of the phenomenon. I propose that this divergence is an emergent factor of what explanations and interpretations aim to do. The degree of commitment a model has to a certain governing paradigm is a function of what that model aims to do. Explanations, as put above, aim to give the full causal chain<sup>11</sup> a certain phenomenon requires to occur. Hence, explanatory models are free to discard any and all governing paradigms in the pursuit of discovering *what is what* about a phenomenon. Interpretations, on the other hand, try to merely provide *a* reading of a phenomenon through a certain lens, namely a chosen governing paradigm. So, interpretative systems are not so free to discard that governing paradigm since they are not concerned with the *what is what* question but rather the question of how one makes sense of that very phenomenon through a chosen paradigm.

Of course, this divergence does not only amount to a difference of aim and content, but also of accuracy. An interpretative system, since it is only concerned with providing a consistent account of a phenomenon through a certain regard, and not with how *exactly* that phenomenon occurred, is far less accurate in providing *the* correct reading of a phenomenon and far more successful and productive in providing a reading of a phenomenon. Explanatory systems, on the other hand, are far less productive, but much more accurate in providing *the* correct reading of a phenomenon.

When we observe the teleological stance, the model aims to provide a reading of the action that is consistent with the rationality principle. Whenever the action is not identified as the optimal means for the inferred goal, or the action cannot be made sense of as directed towards a goal, the action simply fails to make any sense for this model, and the infant for our case. When we take a look at the causal mentalistic model, on the other hand, we do not seem to run into these impasses. Surely, even when we adults utilize the causal mentalistic model of action explanation, we regard other agents as

---

<sup>10</sup>What I mean here by the 'governing paradigm' is the module within an interpretational system that aims to provide the agenda or the perspective from which the phenomenon is made sense of. For instance, faced with the question of income gap between individuals, one could interpret this phenomenon through the paradigm of race, gender or economic class. By observing the factual aspects that have an effect on income like education, work experience and individual choice, the interpretational system constructs a consistent narrative of these aspects with the paradigm that it employs. Hence, the 'rationality principle' that acts as the central module within the teleological stance of Gergely and Csibra could be thought of as an instance of a governing paradigm.

<sup>11</sup>Of course, whether all explanations are causal ones is a philosophical discussion of its own. However, I do not think that this discussion is of any use here. Even if it is the case that there are indeed non-causal explanations, it would still hold that explanations try to give why exactly that certain phenomenon occurred, aiming to provide an exhaustive scenario that could be deemed the one and only way in which it could have occurred. Since having no alternative pathways for a phenomenon to occur does not logically imply causation between the aspects that make up that pathway, this discussion is dismissible here.

being rational choice makers that undertake the optimal behavior in order to attain a certain goal. We also don't regard their actions as merely vain performances, but rather as attempts to attain a certain goal. However, whenever we are faced with an action that does not seem to serve any goal or stems from no reason or desire, we do not give up the ambition of explaining this or that behavior. Surely if we were stuck with our infant capacity to represent actions teleologically, we simply would have to let these cases go unsolved. Therefore, drawing from the considerations I have laid out in the previous paragraphs, the difference between the teleological and the causal mentalistic models seems to be more generally attributable to the difference between interpretations and explanations.<sup>12</sup>

Given the conceptual gulf between them, how could these two models be extensions of one another? It is perhaps in order here to ask what Gergely and Csibra exactly mean by 'extension'. In the previous section, we have seen how, according to Gergely and Csibra, the concepts of the teleological model are 'fictionalized and mentalized' in order to implement mentalistic terms like that of beliefs and desires, in turn extending the teleological stance to the causal mentalistic model of action explanation. At first glance, this only seems to be a substitution of terms, rather than a proper extension of the prior capacity to teleologically represent and interpret others' actions. However, this reading is uncharitable to what Gergely and Csibra are really trying to express. Gergely and Csibra's extension-talk, it seems, has two aspects: (i) extension of scope and (ii) extension from a core-inferential principle. The extension of scope seems to be based on certain scenarios under which an agent 'acts on false beliefs or engages in pretence' and in turn how 'the reality-based teleological stance breaks down as it cannot rationalize the behaviour as a justifiable action.'<sup>13</sup> When the exclusively reality-based teleological stance is extended to a 'fictionalized and mentalized' version, namely the causal mentalistic model as Gergely and Csibra put it, this novel system is now able to account for the cases in which there is no explanatory reference point within concrete reality by 'projecting a fictional world in relation to which the observed behaviour can be justified.'<sup>14</sup> Hence, there is indeed an extension of scope when the infant capacity to interpret actions teleologically is transformed into the adult capacity for mentalistically explaining others' behaviour. The mentalistic model is able to account for cases in which the explanatory reference point for a certain action is non-existent within concrete reality, exactly because this is not the only aspect the causal mentalistic model utilizes, unlike the teleological stance. However, this point is only able to show what is *extended* rather than showing reasons to think that one of these capacities (causal mentalistic action explanation) is the *extension* of the other (the teleological stance), in the sense that they are related. I find it in order to discuss the notion of extension from a core-inferential principle in the next section. I believe that it requires a closer discussion of what the rationality principle is and becomes through a discussion of agents and goals.

#### Section IV: Agent, Goals and Rationality

---

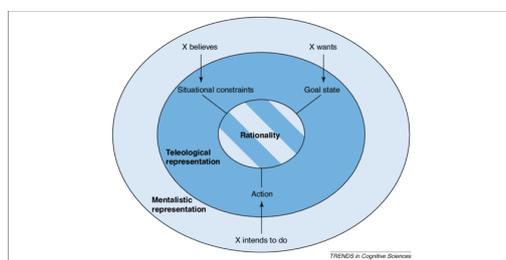
<sup>12</sup>Perhaps, even the points of divergence that Gergely and Csibra identified (1998) as (i) *temporality* and (ii) criteria of acceptance are simply points that actually follow from the overarching difference between explanatory and interpretative systems we have just laid out. However, I think that this project would surpass the aims of this section and of this paper as a whole, and thus I wish not to go into this here.

<sup>13</sup>*ibid* p.258

<sup>14</sup>*ibid* p.258

If the considerations of the previous section are correct, then we can conclude that the gulf between the teleological stance and the causal mentalistic action explanations are deeper than what Gergely and Csibra originally propose. Of course, this is not sufficient reason to conclude that the adult capacity for causal mentalistic action explanation is unrelated to the infant capacity for teleologically interpreting actions. Although the two models differ in their accuracy, productivity and their commitment to what I call the governing paradigm, they could very well be said to be related in at least two veins: (i) they both strive to make sense of human action and (ii) they both originate from the same rationality principle. Although Gergely and Csibra do not spend too much time on how the fact that both these systems have a common subject bears on the conclusion that they are in fact related, they surely spend much time on the second point that has to do with a common core between the two systems, namely the rationality principle. For Gergely and Csibra, both teleological and causal mentalistic action explanations utilize the rationality principle. Since mentalistic representations have the same core module as teleological representations (see Fig. 2), the very *extension* to a mentalistic representation is done so in a *local* manner; the mentalistic representation does not flourish in some other plane but from within the familiar hub of the rationality principle. Perhaps this is the main reason why Gergely and Csibra labelled this performance an *extension*, since, on their view, both of these models are literally building upon the same hub. I argue that the teleological stance and causal mentalistic action explanations are striving to make sense of not the same, but different phenomena. Second, I argue that the rationality principles that are utilized within these two different models are far from being identical. Therefore, these capacities are not related, at least not in the way Gergely and Csibra propose them to be.

Figure 2:



In order to understand what exactly these two different capacities are aiming to make sense of, we may examine some simple examples provided by Gergely and Csibra<sup>15</sup>:

*Q: Why did the man<sup>16</sup> cross the road?*

*A1: To be on the other side.*

*A2: He wanted to be on the other side..*

<sup>15</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>The original example had a chicken instead of a man. I have amended this simply because it would allow us to discard any and all lingering questions we might have of the agency, or minds of chickens.

Gergely and Csibra argue that *A1* is an answer that is given on the basis of a teleological representation of the question, and *A2* is given on the basis of a mentalistic one. First off, it is important to understand what exactly the question is asking. This example suggests that there are two ways to categorize the *why* questions that are directed at the actions of others : (i) questions that are looking to find out what future goal-state the action is directed at and (ii) questions that are looking to find out what prior mental-state the action is generated from. Although we as adults are more familiar with the second reading of these types of questions, there is no reason to think that the first reading is not also a reasonable candidate. When we look at *A1*, the answer is indeed providing the future goal-state, perhaps as a result of observing the aspects of concrete reality, since the answer itself is based on a teleological representation of actions. *A2*, on the other hand, is also a successful answer to the latter reading of the same question, and provides a generative mental source for an action.

Given that these answers are satisfactory, we shall move on to what these answers really make sense of. *A1* appears to attribute a certain means-end relation between the action and the goal. This is also the case with *A2*. However, what seems to divorce these two answers is the content of this means-end relation. When we take a look at *A1*, it is not very hard to conclude that the goal of the action is precisely to be on the other side. Although this intuitively also seems to be the case when we look at *A2*, I think that there is a more sophisticated dynamic that governs that proposition. In *A2*, the precise goal of the action seems not to be on the other side, but rather to satisfy the desire to be on the other side. In this sense, the content of the means-end relation seems to be different in *A1* and *A2*.

So, what does this really show? It shows that the goal of the action is located in a different plane under *A2* in comparison with *A1*. In *A1*, the agent should satisfy a condition *outside* of himself (being on the other side) in order for his action to be detected as an action that is directed towards a specific goal. In *A2*, however, it seems that the agent is only concerned with satisfying a condition *within* (satisfying a desire to be on the other side) that could be very well satisfied without actually *being* on the other side; consider a hallucinogen which affects one's own senses so as to delude them into thinking they are on the other side. What this shift of location shows is that these two models are not only referring to different aspects when making sense of others' actions, but also aiming to explain different sorts of things. The teleological representation, portrayed under *A1*, is only trying to provide why the action *itself* is there and to what purpose it is serving. The mentalistic representation, portrayed under *A2*, on the other hand, is trying to provide why the agent *himself* is there and doing what *he* is doing. There seems to be a difference not only in what is being referred to in making sense of others' actions under teleological and mentalistic representations, but also in the aspect that is being tried to make sense of. Hence, I propose that whereas the teleological model is a model for action interpretation, the causal mentalistic model is a model for explaining *agents* that explains actions only after explaining the inner-states of the agent. Action explanations, under the causal-mentalistic model, seem to be there as an emergent side-effect of what the model is precisely aiming at, namely explaining the *agent's* inner-states.

It is of utmost importance to understand what kind of transformation, if any, the rationality principle undergoes when the alleged extension of the teleological occurs to result in the mentalistic. Let's first examine the rationality principle within the teleological stance. For Gergely and Csibra<sup>17</sup>, the rationality principle within the

<sup>17</sup>Gergely, G. Csibra, G., 2003. Teleological Reasoning in Infancy: The Naive Theory of Rational Action. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7(7), p.289

teleological stance does two main things: (i) regards actions as essentially goal-directed and (ii) regards actions as the optimal pathway to achieve a certain end-state. Hence, under this conception of the rationality principle, one could not make sense of the man crossing the road by zigzagging on the pavement. However, this does not seem to be consistent with what we know about the scope of causal mentalistic explanations. Under a mentalistic representation, as Gergely and Csibra<sup>18</sup> have pointed out, one could consider a fictional reality in which the zigzagging could be made sense of. Hence, this discrepancy seems to suggest a transformation within the ‘core inferential principle of the domain’ itself that has been argued by Gergely and Csibra to be ‘unchanged.’<sup>19</sup> Within the teleological stance, the rationality principle is there as a regulative module that tries to find a certain rationale between the action and the goal. Within the causal mentalistic model, however, the rationality principle that is allegedly the same as what we have within the teleological model does not seem to show much similarity. The reason why we adults are able to make sense of the man zigzagging across the pavement to cross the road—as opposed to the teleological model—is simply because there is not only an amendment to the ‘ontological types’<sup>20</sup> (in our case, fictional mental states over and above reality states) of the domain but also to the core inferential principle—the rationality principle. It seems that the rationality principle regulates the causal mentalistic model, unlike the teleological stance, by constructing a rationale between an agent’s various beliefs, desires and intentions. Hence, this double-nature of the rationality principle that surfaces when considering its role within teleological and mentalistic models is indeed similar to the previously explored discrepancy. The rationality principle within the teleological stance is bringing together the *action* and the *goal*, whereas the rationality principle within the causal mentalistic model is bringing together an agent’s *beliefs*, *desires* and *intentions*. The action *itself* (within the rationality principle) that the causal mentalistic model utilizes does not appear as a real ontological type within the aspects that it is trying to bind together in a certain rationale; it is simply an emergent aspect that is rooted in a separate principle of practical reason which conjectures that an agent will *always* act, rather than abstaining from acting even after coming up with a set of behaviors consistent with his beliefs and desires.

If the considerations of this section are correct, we are in a position to justifiably consider once again the relationship between these two capacities for understanding others’ actions. In §3, we have shown that these two systems are operating on different mechanisms, with different aims. In this section, we have also tried to show that the inner workings, the content of what these two models are trying to explain, and the core system that is dubbed the rationality principle are different than those of the teleological stance. Hence, we do have a sketch of an argument against Gergely and Csibra’s claim that these two capacities are related and also the conception of the later emerging capacity as an extension of the earlier.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued against the claim that causal mentalistic action explanations are a conceptual extension of the teleological stance. In the first section, I have laid out what the numerous habituation studies have shown about infants’ ability

<sup>18</sup>Csibra, G. Gergely, G., 1998. The Teleological Origins of Mentalistic Action Explanations: A Developmental Hypothesis. *Developmental Science*, 1(2), p.259

<sup>19</sup>*ibid.* p.259

<sup>20</sup>*ibid.* p.259

to interpret actions and how these findings helped Gergely and Csibra in developing a new perspective on how we interpret actions early on in our lives. In the second section I have explained Gergely and Csibra's conception of a causal mentalistic model for action explanation, then questioned how the later emerging capacity for mentalistically explaining actions could be said to be related to the earlier teleological stance. In the third section I have tried to provide a larger story of divergence between the causal mentalistic model and the teleological stance through some conceptual considerations about explanations and interpretations. In the last section, I have tried to show two points of distinction the causal mentalistic model and the teleological stance have. One of these has to do with what these two models are aiming to explain and the differences between these explanations. The other point that I have tried to explore has to do with how the rationality principle, which allegedly remains the same throughout to Gergely and Csibra, undergoes certain changes when the teleological and the mentalistic models are carefully compared.

## References

- Davidson, D., 1980. *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dennett, D.C., 2006. *The Intentional Stance*, Cambridge, (Mass.): The MIT Press.
- Alvarez, Maria, 2013. *Kinds of Reasons: An Essay in The Philosophy of Action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butterfill, S.A., 2012. Interacting Mindreaders. *Philosophical Studies*, 165(3), pp.841–863.
- Csibra, G. Gergely, G., 2013. Teleological Understanding of Actions. *Navigating the Social World*, pp.38–43.
- Gergely, G. et al., 1995. Taking The Intentional Stance at 12 Months of Age. *Cognition*, 56(2), pp.165–193.
- Csibra, G. Gergely, G., 1998. The Teleological Origins of Mentalistic Action Explanations: A Developmental Hypothesis. *Developmental Science*, 1(2), pp.255–259.
- Gergely, G. Csibra, G., 2003. Teleological Reasoning in Infancy: The Naive Theory of Rational Action. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7(7), pp.287–292.

# In Defense of the Senses: A Critique of Plato's Epistemology in *Republic V*

Jonah Dunch  
University of Alberta

## Introduction

In *Republic V*, Socrates provides two arguments to show that the lovers of sights and sounds have belief but not knowledge. In this essay, I will explain and critique these arguments. In Section I, I will explain the significance of these arguments to the general project of the *Republic*. In Section II, I will recount the first argument, then, in Section III, I will critique it. In Section IV, I will recount the second argument, then, in Section V, I will explain Gail Fine's interpretation of it. In Section VI, I will argue that the text contradicts Fine's reading of the second argument but is consistent with the two alternative readings she identifies. In Section VII, I will argue that the existential and predicative versions of the argument run into major problems. In Section VIII, I will argue that Fine's veridical version does so too. In my conclusion, I will briefly discuss how Plato could have maintained his general project in light of the critique I have offered.

## I

Socrates's arguments are challenges to Glaucon's suggestion that, by Socrates's own lights, the lovers of sights and sounds are philosophers.<sup>1</sup> Here's the story so far: Socrates has proposed that philosophers—those who love all wisdom—would be the rulers in the ideal city (or in the practically possible city that could come closest to the ideal).<sup>2</sup> In response, Glaucon has remarked that lovers of sights (i.e., aesthetes) seem to “take pleasure in learning things,” as do lovers of sounds (i.e., avid festival-goers).<sup>3</sup> Their pleasure in learning things, Glaucon seems to suggest, is a sort of wisdom, so they must be philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Socrates faces a problem: if these lovers of sights and sounds are philosophers, then (per his earlier proposal) they could be the rulers in the ideal city. Moreover, since (as Plato presents it) the ideal city is an analogue of the ideal soul, the philosopher-ruler must be an analogue of the ruling faculty in the soul, which (for Plato) is reason.<sup>5</sup> As such, the ideal philosopher's qualities must appear in the ideal reason. Socrates (or Plato, speaking through Socrates) cannot accept Glaucon's suggestion that the lovers of sights and sounds are philosophers, for he cannot accept the lovers of sights and sounds as ideal rulers or paragons of reason. Such people are ubiquitous, while Socrates's ideal philosophers are rare.<sup>6</sup> As such, Socrates must show that the lovers

---

<sup>1</sup>Plato, *Republic*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, edited by S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016), 475d.

<sup>2</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 473a-e, 475b.

<sup>3</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 475d.

<sup>4</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 475d-e.

<sup>5</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 441c-e.

<sup>6</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 476b.

of sights and sounds are not philosophers. His two arguments for this conclusion take the same rhetorical route: he maintains that the lovers of sights and sound are not philosophers because, really, the former lack knowledge while the latter have it. But, as I will later suggest, Socrates has (or rather, Plato *had*) other rhetorical routes open to him.

## II

In his response to Glaucon, Socrates contends that the lovers of sights and sounds are not philosophers but are *like* them. The *true* philosophers, Socrates claims, are the lovers of seeing the truth.<sup>7</sup> Socrates then moves to justify this claim with recourse to his notion of the forms (the “thing itself”<sup>8</sup>). Since the beautiful and the ugly are opposites, Socrates argues, they must be two things. (His hidden premise, it seems, is that if something is the opposite of something else, then it must make a pair of two things with its opposite.) If they are two things together, he claims, then apart they are each one thing. The same goes for all of the forms: because each form is the opposite of another form, and so makes a pair of two things with its opposite, each form must be one thing, not many.<sup>9</sup> Yet, since the forms “appear all over the place in partnership with actions and bodies, and with one another,” they each appear to be many things, not one thing.<sup>10</sup> The lovers of sights and sounds, Socrates now declares, are “passionately devoted to” particulars (i.e., tokens that instantiate the forms), but their thought cannot see the forms themselves.<sup>11</sup> What’s more, Socrates contends, those who believe in the particular tokens of some form (e.g., beautiful things) but not in the form itself (e.g., the beautiful) are “living in a dream.”<sup>12</sup> By contrast, those rare people who believe in the forms themselves, who can grasp both the forms and their particular tokens, are “very much awake.”<sup>13</sup> Socrates seems to assume that thought of the forms constitutes knowledge, while thought of particulars—coupled, apparently, with disbelief in the forms—constitutes mere belief. As such, according to Socrates, those who are awake—those who can apprehend the forms, whom he hints to be the true philosophers—have knowledge. But those who are asleep—the by-now much-maligned lovers of sights and sounds—have only belief.<sup>14</sup>

## III

This first argument is unpersuasive, for Socrates assumes a premise that the lovers of sights and sounds would not grant: that thought of the forms constitutes knowledge, while thought of particulars (plus disbelief in the forms) constitutes mere belief. As Gail Fine puts it, Plato’s “dialectical requirement” is that both Socrates and the lovers of sights

<sup>7</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 475e. In some cases, Socrates claims x by stating x himself. In other cases, Socrates claims x by asking Glaucon a rhetorical question of the form ‘x, right?’ and Glaucon assents to x in response. Throughout this paper, I say ‘Socrates claims x’ when referring to cases of either kind.

<sup>8</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 480a.

<sup>9</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 476a.

<sup>10</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 476a.

<sup>11</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 476b.

<sup>12</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 476c.

<sup>13</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 476c-d. See 476b for the claim that these people are rare.

<sup>14</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 476d.

and sounds accept all of the argument's premises.<sup>15</sup> Only from this common ground can Socrates drive his opponents to surprising but convincing conclusions.<sup>16</sup> But here Socrates fails to meet this dialectical requirement, since the lovers of sights and sounds would reject the claim that thought of particulars (plus disbelief in the forms) constitutes mere belief. To recall what Glaucon suggested in the first place, the lovers of sights and sounds are what they are because they "take pleasure in learning things."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, if one learns about some sensible particulars—the finer points of epic poetry, for instance—then one seems to be gaining a kind of knowledge about those particulars. (This is so even if, all the while, one does not believe in any forms underlying those particulars, like a form of the beautiful underlying epic poetry.) The burden is on Socrates to show that things are not as they seem, that learning about sensible particulars is not a kind of knowledge. As such, he cannot simply assume, as he does, that thought of particulars (plus disbelief in the forms) constitutes mere belief. He must argue for this claim if he is to catch the lovers of sights and sounds in his web.

#### IV

In his second argument, Socrates defends an account of knowledge that leaves out the lovers of sights and sounds, but based on premises they would accept. Here's how it goes: knowledge, Socrates begins, must be knowledge of something that *is*. Glaucon accepts this claim on behalf of the lovers of sights and sounds.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Socrates claims, the complete object of knowledge is what completely *is*, and the complete object of ignorance is what completely *is not*. Yet in that case, he remarks, if anything were to *be* but also *not be*, it would lie in between what completely *is* and what completely *is not*. As such, neither knowledge nor ignorance would deal with it; instead it would be the object of some unique power lying in between these poles. Socrates's project, now, is to identify this in-between power, and from there, to identify what lies in between what completely *is* and what completely *is not*.<sup>19</sup> To pursue this project, he turns to the topic of belief. Belief, he says, is a power distinct from the power of knowledge. Moreover, these two powers deal with different things, with the object of knowledge being what *is*, as he has established.<sup>20</sup> Though Glaucon is sold on these points, Socrates backtracks to clarify what he means by 'power' and 'belief' (perhaps to make sure the lovers and sights would buy into his argument so far).

Socrates defines a power (or capacity, as Fine puts it<sup>21</sup>) as "a type of thing that enables us . . . to do whatever we are able to do," offering sight and hearing as illustrative examples.<sup>22</sup> One cannot distinguish the powers by any sensory qualities, Socrates says, because they have none. Rather, one can distinguish one power from another only by "what it deals with and what it does," so different powers have different objects

<sup>15</sup>Gail Fine, Ch. VIII, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," in *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford University Press, 1999), 217.

<sup>16</sup>That is, if the lovers of sights and sounds reject even one of Socrates's premises, then by their lights his argument cannot be sound, and he cannot hope to convince them of his conclusion.

<sup>17</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 475a.

<sup>18</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 476e.

<sup>19</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 477a-b.

<sup>20</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 477b.

<sup>21</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 220.

<sup>22</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 477b-c.

and different activities.<sup>23</sup> Socrates and Glaucon agree, plausibly, that knowledge and belief are powers—after all, each seems to fit Socrates’s rough-and-ready definition of a power. Glaucon says that “belief is . . . the power that enables us to believe.”<sup>24</sup> As “the most effective power of all,”<sup>25</sup> knowledge is presumably the power that enables us to know—and to know infallibly. But while knowledge and belief are both powers, they are clearly different ones, for the former is infallible while the latter is fallible. Given that different powers have different objects, and that knowledge and belief are different powers, it follows that the object of knowledge must be different from the object of belief.<sup>26</sup> This granted, and recalling (as Socrates reiterates) that the object of knowledge is what *is*, the object of belief cannot be what *is*. Yet it seems that a believer takes his belief to deal with *something*; it is impossible to believe *nothing*.<sup>27</sup> So, belief is not ignorance either, as the object of ignorance is nothing. Belief cannot be beyond either knowledge or ignorance, since these are infallible extremes. Hence belief must lie in between knowledge and ignorance: it is “more opaque than knowledge but clearer than ignorance.”<sup>28</sup>

With belief now identified as the in-between power,<sup>29</sup> Socrates is close to completing his rhetorical project. What’s left is to determine what both *is* and *is not*; this will be the object of belief. Socrates proposes that particulars fit the bill, as each one is some property *F* in some respect while also surely the opposite property  $\sim F$  in some other respect. (For example, Socrates himself had a beautiful mind and an ugly face.) The in-between power, belief, has found its in-between object: the particulars.<sup>30</sup> Since the lovers of sights and sounds attend to particulars (e.g., “many beautiful things”) but not to the forms behind them (e.g., “the beautiful itself”), they have beliefs but “have no knowledge of what their beliefs are about.”<sup>31</sup> By contrast, those who attend to the forms have knowledge about them, since the forms completely *are*. In light of this conclusion, Socrates judges, it is fair to call the lovers of sights and sounds “philodoxers” (lovers of belief) rather than “philosophers” (lovers of wisdom or knowledge).<sup>32</sup> Note that Socrates and Glaucon think the lovers of sights and sounds ought to accept this conclusion,<sup>33</sup> so they are confident that this argument meets Plato’s dialectical requirement. If the newly branded philodoxers ought to accept it, then Socrates’s second argument succeeds—or does it?

## V

As I have described, Socrates claims that knowledge deals with what *is*, while ignorance deals with what *is not*, and belief deals with what both *is* and *is not*. He relies on this construal of the three powers in question to argue that the lovers of sights and sounds lack knowledge, attending as they do to what both *is* and *is not*. As such, the

<sup>23</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 477c-d.

<sup>24</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 477e.

<sup>25</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 477d.

<sup>26</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478a.

<sup>27</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478b.

<sup>28</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478c.

<sup>29</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478d.

<sup>30</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 479c.

<sup>31</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 479e.

<sup>32</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 480a.

<sup>33</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 480a.

success of Socrates's argument turns on what he means by a power 'dealing with what *is*.'<sup>34</sup> Fine presents three interpretive options:

- a. The existential reading: 'What *is*' means 'what exists.'
- b. The predicative reading: 'What *is*' means 'what is some property *F*.'
- c. The veridical reading: 'What *is*' means 'what is true.'<sup>35</sup>

On the existential reading, knowledge deals with what exists while belief deals with what both exists and does not exist. On the predicative reading, knowledge deals with what is completely *F* while belief deals with what is both *F* and  $\sim F$ .<sup>36</sup> Fine thinks these readings both violate the dialectical requirement (that the lovers of sights and sounds agree to the premises), so she endorses the veridical reading.<sup>37</sup> On this reading, knowledge only deals with true propositions, while belief deals with both true propositions and false propositions. More specifically, Fine suggests, the veridical claim about belief could have one of two meanings: either it means that belief deals with propositions that are *each* both true and false, or it means that belief deals with a *set* that includes both true propositions and false propositions. Since the former reading is *prima facie* implausible, Fine endorses the latter.<sup>38</sup> In summary, Fine's veridical version of the argument runs as follows:

1. Knowledge deals with what is true, in the sense that it deals with a set that only includes true propositions.<sup>39</sup>
2. Belief deals with what is true and what is false, in the sense that it deals with a set that includes both true propositions and false propositions.<sup>40</sup>
3. Each of the many *F*s (where the many *F*s are sensible properties) is both (another property) *F* and (the opposite property)  $\sim F$ , in the sense that each of the many *F*s is instantiated by some (other) *F* tokens and some (opposite)  $\sim F$  tokens.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Fine translates *epi* as "sets over," but I follow Reeve's translation in using "deals with."

<sup>36</sup>The relevant property *F* will be different in different situations. What matters is that for any known thing *x*, *x* is property *F*, and *x* is not property  $\sim F$ , whereas for any believed thing *y*, *y* is both *F* and  $\sim F$ . One cannot know an object that is both beautiful and ugly, but one can believe in some object that is both beautiful and ugly (in different respects).

<sup>37</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 220. Specifically, Fine cites these claims of the two readings as violations of the dialectical requirement: the objects of knowledge and belief are disjoint (both readings), knowledge involves acquaintance with what actually exists (or so it must be, for the existential reading to seem plausible), every object of belief only half-exists (the existential reading), and one cannot know that something is both *F* and  $\sim F$  (the predicative reading). The lovers of sights and sounds, Fine thinks, have no reason to agree with any of these claims from the outset. In the space that follows, I will not consider Fine's claims about the other two readings in detail. Instead, I will introduce further reasons to reject these versions of the argument (as well as Fine's).

<sup>38</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 219-220. To fill out Fine's account, ignorance presumably only deals with what (a) does not exist, (b) is  $\sim F$ , or (c) is false.

<sup>39</sup>218. I am listing Fine's own numbered premises and conclusions. I have reworded most of these claims to reflect Fine's own elaborations on them, and to favour Reeve's translation of some of Plato's terms over Fine's.

<sup>40</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 219.

<sup>41</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 221-222. For example, roundness is both beautiful and ugly, in the sense that some round things are beautiful while others are ugly.

4. The conventional norms the lovers of sights and sounds have about the many *F*s *are* and *are not*, in the sense that these conventional norms comprise a set that includes both true propositions and false propositions.<sup>42</sup>
5. Therefore, the lovers of sights and sounds have belief, not knowledge, about the many *F*s.<sup>43</sup>
6. Knowledge is possible.<sup>44</sup>
7. There must, then, be non-sensible objects of knowledge (since knowledge requires an account, and only non-sensible properties can provide an account).<sup>45</sup>
8. Therefore, there are forms (as Fine takes the forms to be “non-sensible properties”<sup>46</sup>).<sup>47</sup>
9. Those who know the forms have knowledge, while those who are restricted to the many *F*s at worst have ignorance (if their conventional norms are all false) and at best have belief (if at least some of their conventional norms are true).<sup>48</sup>
10. Therefore, knowledge deals with the forms, and belief deals with the many *F*s, in the sense that all knowledge requires knowledge of non-sensible properties, i.e., the forms, whereas all belief is restricted to sensible properties, i.e., the many *F*s.<sup>49</sup>

On Fine’s account, (3) helps motivate (4): since the many *F*s are contradictory in nature, some of the conventional norms the lovers of sights and sounds have about them are bound to be false generalizations about various properties.<sup>50</sup> Plato claims elsewhere<sup>51</sup> that knowledge requires an account; if so, the contingency and changeability of sensible properties makes them explanatorily inadequate.<sup>52</sup> As such, per (7), we need non-sensible things—the forms—to provide an account, and with it, knowledge.<sup>53</sup> This all leads to Socrates’s rhetorical target: only the philosophers, and not the lovers of sights and sounds, have access to the forms, and so only they have knowledge.

## VI

Fine endorses the veridical reading, it seems, because she thinks it renders a coherent argument while the other readings do not.<sup>54</sup> (Stay tuned: I will argue later that no

<sup>42</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 222-223. Fine cites Plato, *Republic*, 479d3-5, for this claim. Fine translates *nomina* as “belief,” but to avoid confusion with *doxa* (belief proper), I follow Reeve’s translation in using “conventional norms.”

<sup>43</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 222. Fine cites Plato, *Republic*, 479e1-5, for this claim.

<sup>44</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 224. Exact quote.

<sup>45</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 224.

<sup>46</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 215.

<sup>47</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 224.

<sup>48</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 224. Exact quote (except that I leave ‘forms’ uncapitalized).

<sup>49</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 224. Fine cites Plato, *Republic*, 480a1, for this claim.

<sup>50</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 223.

<sup>51</sup>Fine cites *Meno* 98a, *Phaedo* 76b, and *Republic* 531e.

<sup>52</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 223.

<sup>53</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 223-224.

<sup>54</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 219-220.

version of the argument is coherent.) All things considered, though, charity should not trump accuracy. As I will now argue, Fine's reading contradicts the text where one or both of the other readings do not.

For starters, Fine's veridical reading clashes with what Socrates actually says about powers and their objects. On Fine's veridical reading, per (1) and (2), Socrates contends that knowledge and belief can both deal with true propositions. In the text, however, Socrates seems to contradict this view: he claims that it is impossible for the object of knowledge and the object of belief to be the same.<sup>55</sup> To resolve this apparent contradiction, Fine interprets the different objects of knowledge and belief to be different—but overlapping—sets of propositions.<sup>56</sup> On her reading, the object of knowledge is a set including only true propositions, while the object of belief is a set including both true propositions and false propositions; these sets overlap, but they are not the same.<sup>57</sup> This move is elegant but unconvincing. When Socrates claims that powers differ by their objects and activities, he does not seem to allow for overlap between the objects of different powers. He seems to take sight and hearing to be paradigmatic powers, for he supplies them as examples of powers that should help Glaucon “understand the thing [he is] trying to describe.”<sup>58</sup> What holds for sight and hearing, then, we should expect to hold for other powers. Being different powers, sight and hearing must have different objects—sights and sounds, respectively. Yet sights and sounds are not overlapping sets of things; they are mutually exclusive kinds of things. One cannot see sounds or hear sights. As such, when Socrates talks about the objects of different powers, he does not seem to have overlapping *sets* of things in mind. Rather, he seems to have in mind different *kinds* of things. *Contra* Fine's veridical reading, then, we should expect knowledge and belief to deal with different kinds of things, not overlapping sets of things. On the existential reading, knowledge and belief *do* deal with different kinds of things: knowledge with what exists, belief what both exists and does not exist. The same goes for the predicative reading: knowledge deals with what is completely *F*, while belief deals with a different kind of thing, namely, what is both *F* and  $\sim F$ . As such, Socrates's characterization of powers and their objects belies Fine's veridical reading but is consistent with either the existential reading or the predicative reading.

Moreover, on the veridical reading Socrates makes some puzzling claims. On this reading, Socrates's gloss of the object of ignorance—what is *not*—leads him to a contradiction. He claims that “surely what is not is most correctly characterized not as a single thing, but as nothing.”<sup>59</sup> By contrast, he claims, “there is some single thing that a believer believes.”<sup>60</sup> Belief cannot be ignorance—the power that deals with what is *not*, that is, *nothing*—because it is impossible to believe, yet to believe nothing.<sup>61</sup> On the veridical reading, ‘what is *not*’ means ‘what is false.’ So, on this reading, Socrates claims that what is false is *nothing*. On the veridical reading, the term *the single thing that a believer believes* must mean *any single proposition that a believer believes*. To form the contrast Socrates is drawing between *nothing* and *the single thing that a believer believes*, the term *nothing* must cover, specifically, *any single false proposition*. But here we have a problem. Given that the power of belief deals with a set containing both true propositions

<sup>55</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478a.

<sup>56</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 220.

<sup>57</sup>Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57,” 219-221.

<sup>58</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 477c.

<sup>59</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478b-c.

<sup>60</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478b.

<sup>61</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478b-c.

and false propositions, it is possible for a believer to believe false propositions. But if a believer does believe a false proposition, that proposition must simultaneously be nothing (since it is false) and a single thing (since the believer believes it). So on the veridical reading, Socrates contradicts himself. By contrast, the existential reading and the predicative reading both avoid this pitfall. Because on these readings belief and ignorance deal with different kinds of things, believers are not liable to wind up believing what ignorance deals with, namely, nothing. Instead, believers will only believe single things—things that both exist and do not exist, or things that are both  $F$  and  $\sim F$ .

Furthermore, Socrates's examples of things that both *are* and *are not* support the predicative reading. He suggests that "what partakes in both being and not being" is "each of the many things," that is, sensible particulars, for any beautiful particular can seem ugly, any pious one unjust, any great one small.<sup>62</sup> Socrates seems to be identifying the things that both *are* and *are not* as the things that are both  $F$  and  $\sim F$ . Fine actually accepts that Socrates here uses *is* predicatively; she glosses Socrates's remarks as her claim (3). But she denies that this fact counts against her veridical reading. Rather, she contends that Plato deliberately "shifts from a veridical to a predicative use of 'is,'" for "there is "a connecting link between the two uses" of *is*."<sup>63</sup> Knowledge is truth-entailing, Fine reminds us, and it requires an account—or so Plato claims in other dialogues.<sup>64</sup> If one is restricted to the many sensible properties (i.e., the many  $F$ s), one will only be able to offer an account of a given property in terms of various sensible properties. But such accounts are bound to be false, since each sensible property can have both  $F$  tokens and  $\sim F$  tokens. To use Fine's example, suppose that the lovers of sights and sounds "define beauty, at least in this painting, as, for instance, 'bright colour.'"<sup>65</sup> Their account of beauty would be false, since "some brightly coloured things are ugly, not beautiful."<sup>66</sup> But in the absence of a true account—one that holds for all cases of beauty—they cannot have any knowledge about beauty. Here, then, is Fine's connecting link between the veridical use of *is* and the predicative use of *is*: "restricted to the many  $F$ s [the predicative use of *is*], one can at best achieve belief [the veridical use of *is*]."<sup>67</sup>

Again, Fine's explanation is ingenious but unpersuasive. For one, Fine glosses *the many things*, of which Socrates speaks, as *the many  $F$ s*, where  $F$ s are sensible properties. But Socrates is clearly talking about particulars themselves, not their properties. For instance, he says that "the many things that are doubles" are as much as halves as doubles.<sup>68</sup> But no property can be a double or a half; only a particular can, for only a particular can have the property of being double something else or half of something else. Fine's claim that the lovers of sights and sounds are restricted to sensible properties relies on glossing the many things as sensible properties. But, as we have seen, this gloss cuts sharply against the text. Moreover, Fine's explanation invokes what Plato says in other places, rather than working with the evidence of this passage alone. Given the dynamism of Socratic method, and of Plato's views between dialogues, we should avoid projecting onto one passage ideas that only show up elsewhere. Indeed, in this passage Socrates seems to be trying to define knowledge without making too many background

<sup>62</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 478e-479b.

<sup>63</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 222.

<sup>64</sup>Fine cites *Meno* 98a, *Phaedo* 76b, and *Republic* 531e. Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 223

<sup>65</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 223.

<sup>66</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 223.

<sup>67</sup>Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57," 224.

<sup>68</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 479b.

assumptions—any assumed definition of knowledge could fail to meet the dialectical requirement. As such, we should try to make sense of his argument without importing the extratextual claim that knowledge requires an account. Without access to this claim as a background assumption, Fine cannot explain why at this point Plato would deliberately switch from a veridical use of *is* to a predicative use of *is*. This considered, it seems more plausible that Socrates (or Plato, rather) was using *is* predicatively the whole time.

## VII

All told, the text fits with the predicative reading, or both the predicative reading and the existential reading, at points where it clashes with Fine's veridical reading. But there's bad news for Socrates and Glaucon: neither of the alternative readings gives them a strong argument. I will now reconstruct the existential and predicative versions of the argument so that they run parallel to Fine's reconstruction of the veridical version.

On the existential reading, the argument would run as follows:

1. Knowledge deals with things that completely exist.
2. Belief deals with things that both exist and do not exist.
3. The many things, i.e., the many sensible particulars, each have some property  $F$  and the opposite property  $\sim F$ .
4. The conventional norms the lovers of sights and sounds have about properties both exist and do not exist.
5. Therefore, the lovers of sights and sounds have belief, not knowledge, about the many sensible particulars.
6. Knowledge is possible.
7. There must, then, be non-sensible objects of knowledge (since sensible things are the objects of belief, and belief and knowledge have different objects).
8. Therefore, there are forms (so long as forms are coextensive with non-sensible things).
9. Those who know the forms have knowledge, while those who are restricted to the many sensible particulars only have belief.
10. Therefore, knowledge deals with the forms (i.e., non-sensible things), and belief deals with the many sensible particulars.

On this reading, (1), (2), and (4) are existential claims. I have modified (3) in this version of the argument in light of my critique of Fine's interpretation; Socrates's many things are particulars, not properties. On the new version of (4), the conventional norms in question are still conventional norms about properties. Socrates is no longer talking about sensible particulars. Rather, he is now considering "the masses' many conventional norms concerning beauty and the rest," that is, the myriad properties that particulars can instantiate.<sup>69</sup> From (5) to (10), the existential reading largely matches Fine's, only

<sup>69</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 479d. It seems implicit that the *masses* are coextensive with the lovers of sights and sounds, since Socrates moves from this claim to a claim about those "who look at beautiful things but do not see the beautiful itself," whom he describes as people who "love and look at beautiful sounds, colors, and things of that sort. (479d-480a.)"

replacing the many *F*s with the many sensible particulars. Now on this reading, the move from (3) to (4) is unmotivated; Socrates does not explain how the properties of the many sensible particulars bear on the existential status of people's conventional norms about properties.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the existential versions of (2) and (4) clearly do not make sense. If Socrates understands *existence* in a normal sense, nothing can both exist and not exist. Socrates does not lay out some special sense in which he understands *existence*, one in which something could both exist and not exist. Indeed, at no point does he explain what it means for something to both *be* and *not be* in existential terms of any sort. He only does so in predicative terms, as in either version of (3). Yet as it turns out, the predicative reading itself runs into problems too.

On the predicative reading, the argument would run as follows:

1. Knowledge deals with things that are completely some property *F*.
2. Belief deals with objects that are both *F* and  $\sim F$ .
3. The many things, i.e., the many sensible particulars, each have some property *F* and the opposite property  $\sim F$ .
4. The conventional norms the lovers of sights and sounds have about properties are both *F* and  $\sim F$ .
5. Therefore, the lovers of sights and sounds have belief, not knowledge, about the many sensible particulars.
6. Knowledge is possible.
7. There must, then, be non-sensible objects of knowledge (since sensible things are the objects of belief, and belief and knowledge have different objects).
8. Therefore, there are forms (so long as forms are coextensive with non-sensible things).
9. Those who know the forms have knowledge, while those who are restricted to the many sensible particulars only have belief.
10. Therefore, knowledge deals with the forms (i.e., non-sensible things), and belief deals with the many sensible particulars.

On this reading, (1), (2), and (4) are predicative claims. The predicative reading matches the existential reading on (3) and (5) to (10). And just like on the existential reading, here the move from (3) to (4) is unmotivated. Socrates does not explain how the properties of the many sensible particulars bear on the *properties* of people's conventional norms about properties themselves.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, (4) is dubious in itself.<sup>72</sup> It is unclear what properties *F* and  $\sim F$  conventional norms could have, given that these conventional

<sup>70</sup>This move would be unmotivated even if the existential reading used Fine's version of (3), since Socrates would still want an explanation of how the properties of, in this case, the many *F*s bear on the existential status of people's conventional norms about properties.

<sup>71</sup>And as before, this move would be unmotivated even if the predicative reading used Fine's version of (3), since Socrates would still want an explanation of how the properties of, in this case, the many *F*s bear on the properties of people's conventional norms about properties.

<sup>72</sup>This will be a problem for any hybrid version of the argument that includes a predicative reading of (4), such as a version that pairs an existential reading of (1) and (2) with a predicative reading of (4).

norms seem to be people's cognitive attitudes about properties, not property-bearing things like sensible particulars.<sup>73</sup>

## VIII

In sum, both the existential reading and the predicative reading of Socrates's second argument face serious difficulties. How about the veridical reading, after all? To recall, Fine's veridical reading flounders in the absence of a claim imported from outside the passage in question—the claim that knowledge requires an account. But laying exegetical doubts aside, suppose for the sake of argument that Socrates *does* assume that knowledge requires an account. Even so, the move from (6) to (7) and (8) is shaky. It is not clear that any account relying on the many *F*s is necessarily untrue, and that only non-sensible properties (i.e., the forms) can provide the sort of account that knowledge requires. To recall, on this reading Plato's idea is that, since any sensible property can have both *F* tokens and  $\sim F$  tokens, any account that defines a given property in terms of various sensible properties is doomed to make a false generalization. To use a new example, one cannot define beauty, even only in this song, as sonic harmony, for another harmonious song could sound ugly (because, for example, the singer has a grating voice). For this reason, we need some general notion of the beautiful, understood as a non-sensible property, to account for beauty as instantiated by things like beautiful songs. Or so the story goes. But is this really the case? One could, I suggest, account for beauty—as instantiated by its tokens—by identifying the common clusters of qualities, or family resemblances, that beautiful things share, or by identifying the sociolinguistic norms governing the application of the term 'beauty' to various properties and particulars. If so, then a knowledge-making account of the beauty in beautiful things need not invoke a transcendent, universal, non-sensible property of *the beautiful*. The forms may simply not be necessary.

Moreover, the nature of the forms as explanatory entities is hopelessly vague. At minimum, they seem to be universal concepts and non-sensible properties or things. As universal concepts, perhaps they explain why each particular token instantiates its type. For example, the reason some beautiful song is beautiful is that it participates in the form of the beautiful. But this account is still vague, not to say mysterious, since Socrates does not spell out the exact nature of the forms. Is the form of the beautiful a set of propositions? If so, these propositions would serve as criteria for determining whether or not something is beautiful. But any proposition of this sort—one that says 'x is beautiful if P'—would require a further justifying account, which would require more forms, and so on in an infinite regress. Is the form of the beautiful an abstract object of some kind? If so, the nature of this object is unclear. It seems only possible to talk about the forms with reference to what they are not, namely, particulars. Or is the form of the beautiful a perfect exemplar of beauty? If so, we would still have to explain what makes such an exemplar perfect. To do this, we would have to invoke either more forms, again kicking off an infinite regress, or a different sort of explanation, thereby undermining the original *raison d'être* of the forms as explanatory entities.

<sup>73</sup>Also, a version that combines either an existential reading or a predicative reading of (1) and (2) with a veridical reading of (4) would be exposed to the same challenges Fine's version faces in connecting (3) to (4). And even if such a version were allowed the assumption that knowledge requires an account, it would still face difficulties moving from (6) to (7) and (8), for the same reasons discussed in the next body paragraph.

## Conclusion

If what I have said is right, then both of Plato's arguments for the claim that the lovers of sights and sounds lack knowledge lead to a rhetorical dead end. The first argument fails to meet Plato's dialectical requirement that the lovers of sights and sounds would agree to its premises. Fine's veridical reading of the second argument clashes with the text where the alternatives do not. However, the second argument runs into thorny difficulties no matter which reading holds.

What could Socrates have done to reach his target—that is, withholding the title of philosopher from the lovers of sights and sounds—without taking the rhetorical route he did? He had, I suggest, another route open to him: he could have argued that the lovers of sights and sounds have knowledge, but not the relevant *kind* of knowledge. Sure, Socrates could have answered Glaucon, the lovers of sights and sounds have knowledge about sensible things. But the philosopher's knowledge is different: it concerns justice, goodness, beauty, and the nature of knowledge itself. Sights and sounds are all well and good, but they do not have the same political and psychological significance as these universal normative concepts. As such, while both classes of people have knowledge, only the philosophers have knowledge important to the rule of cities and the human soul. This is why the philosophers—and not the lovers of sights and sounds—would rule in the ideal city, and why their qualities provide a model for the ideal reason.

## References

- Plato. *Republic*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve. In *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, edited by S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve, 234-418. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016.
- Fine, Gail. Chapter VIII. "Knowledge and Belief in Republic 57." In *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, edited by Gail Fine, 215-246. Oxford University Press, 1999.

# Temperance and Sustainability: An Argument for the Competence of Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics in Environmentalism

Thomas Black  
University of Alberta

## Abstract

Virtue ethics are becoming an increasingly popular proposed solution for the environmental crisis humanity is currently facing. As such, there has been a rapid expansion of the general understanding of virtue ethics, with many philosophers advocating differing accounts of environmentally oriented virtues to tackle the dilemmas our society is facing.<sup>123</sup> Developing from traditional Aristotelian accounts of eudaimonistic virtue ethics, many thinkers have come to support pluralistic theories targeted at responding to the environmental crisis, resulting in the needless proliferation of existing virtues. Some theorists have even synthesized traditional virtue ethics with teleologically-founded notions of moral considerability, further impeding virtue ethics' capacity to address environmental issues.<sup>4</sup> I suggest a return to a neo-Aristotelian notion of virtue ethics which hinges upon a contemporary definition of temperance as the primary concern of environmental virtue ethics, while also defending a limited unity of the virtues as a means of manifesting temperance with proper virtue of character. This position is juxtaposed against Ronald Sandler's theory of environmentally sensitive virtue ethics, which advocates for a pluralistically teleological virtue ethics theory premised on biocentric egalitarianism.

## I. Redefining Temperance

Virtue ethics are normative ethical theories distinct from a teleological end or deontological rules. While still concerned with actions and their results, virtue ethics focus primarily on the quality of character and intention implicated in an action as opposed to the explicit consequences of an action. This is not to say that virtue ethics are contrary to consequentialist or deontological accounts of right action, as one must still consider the resulting effect of one's actions. However, it is generally the conception that to act with virtuous intent and virtuous knowledge will result in the correct action leading to the appropriate consequences. Such a doctrine enables the individual to confront environmental issues with a disposition capable of perceiving the correct course of action, contingent upon the individual possessing the implicated moral virtues.

---

<sup>1</sup>Hursthouse.

<sup>2</sup>Snow.

<sup>3</sup>McAlear.

<sup>4</sup>Sandler.

Aristotle defined a *virtue* as a state of being which “both completes the good state of that thing and makes it perform its function well.”<sup>5</sup> A virtue is thus a state of being which disposes an individual to act in a right manner, with their end being the human function of eudaimonia. This requires that both the intention and disposition behind an action be virtuous for an action to be truly in accordance with virtue. Aristotle identified contemplation as this human function, as this alone seeks no end beyond itself and is unique to humankind.<sup>6</sup> A virtuous state is thus what enables the individual to engage in a contemplative life. This establishes several qualifying grounds for Aristotle’s twelve moral virtues of character. These *virtues of character*, which are states of being and disposition, represent “some sort of mean between excess and deficiency.”<sup>7</sup> Being in a state of virtue enables an agent to react to moral decisions such that they do not exist in vicious over—or under—representations of any character trait. For example, in any decision regarding courage, it is possible to viciously embody such a state; one might be immobilized by fear, the deficiency of courage, or one might foolishly endanger oneself in a grand excess of courage. Only in understanding the virtuous mean of courage might one flourish under circumstances requiring it, thus capacitating the individual to fulfill the human function in excellence. To be in a state of virtue hence enables individuals to engage in right action and live according to eudaimonistic ends.

Aristotle wrote in such antiquity that his virtues must be developed in response to modernity. The virtuous state in question, *temperance*, was by Aristotle’s conception only concerned with one’s pursuit of “pleasures of the body.”<sup>8</sup> This he limited to one’s conduct regarding food and sex, or other immediately-gratifying bodily pleasures. As society has advanced and innovation has multiplied the human capacity to surround oneself with all manner of wasteful comforts, let us broaden our definition of *temperance* to the moderation of one’s pursuit of all manifestations of pleasure and luxury.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, to act in a state of temperance would require the individual to be conscious of all negative by-products of one’s actions, not limited to moderating one’s food intake.

Presumably, Aristotle himself would have come to such a definition were he conscious of the impacts of environmental externalities in human societies. His own advocacy for the exertion of self-control in one’s diet relied upon the diet’s capacity to endanger one’s health and interfere with one’s lifestyle, thus hindering the human capacity to flourish.<sup>10</sup> The environmental crisis now threatens all human life, dramatically redefining the human understanding of right action as our decisions jeopardize our prosperity and overall health. To temper only one’s pursuit of immediately gratifying dietary pleasure no longer suffices, as such a limited understanding of temperance poses a nearly unanimous threat to human flourishing.

This modern definition of temperance is contingent on a limited unity of the virtues as it would be practically impossible to exist in a virtuous state of temperance without exhibiting any of the other virtues. Nancy Snow aptly perceived Aristotle’s virtues as “[regulating] different spheres of life.”<sup>11</sup> Otherwise put, specific virtues are more pertinent to certain decisions than others, but despite this somewhat hierarchical division

---

<sup>5</sup>EN 15 1106b

<sup>6</sup>EN 15 1178a

<sup>7</sup>EN 25 1106b

<sup>8</sup>EN 10 1118a1

<sup>9</sup>Luxury refers to any desires an individual may have that are not inherent for survival, nor for the immediate pursuit of eudaimonia.

<sup>10</sup>EN 20 1119a

<sup>11</sup>Snow.

of virtues, one virtue being more relevant to a situation does not mean that other virtues are entirely irrelevant. The virtuous agent's quality of character must therefore make relevant whatever character traits are required of them in changing circumstances, rather than stubbornly adhere to any one character trait over all others. For example, one must possess the good temper to endure criticism while also having the pride to defend one's position in the face of what one perceives as undue reproach. In this instance however, justice might not be relevant to the circumstances. Hence, the unity of Aristotle's virtues is limited as one's application of the twelve traits must adapt constantly to make relevant the dispositions necessary for flourishing in any given state. Aristotle himself advocated heavily for the practice of wisdom as an intellectual virtue in order to enable the individual to practice each virtue as they become relevant. He also identified this most relevant environmental virtue, temperance, as being "what preserves practical wisdom," as it provides the agent with "a theoretical grasp on what is good for themselves and for human beings."<sup>12</sup>

## II. Application to Environmentalism

This unity of virtues is particularly relevant to environmental decision making, as the exhibition of other virtues is necessary to make one's practice of temperance effective as opposed to vicious. One must also understand the capacity to temper one's desires without hindering one's capacity to flourish. For example, it would be fruitless for the temperate individual, viciously excessive in pride, to attempt to make a virtuous decision regarding the environment as their inflated sense of self might prevent them from making the environmentally sensible choice, should it conflict with their self-interest. Similarly, one must practice modesty in order to accurately assess one's needs as it concerns the pursuit of human flourishing and environmental waste. Certain virtues, however, are far less involved in environmentally temperate decisions; for example, patience might not be immediately relevant to an environmental decision beyond the fact that exhibiting patience might contribute to one's possession of other virtues. An interplay of virtues must hence be exhibited, yet complete unity of the virtues does not concern the environment beyond this assumption.

Modern environmental virtue ethics have, in numerous ways, diverged greatly from the Aristotelian tradition. For many of the same reasons I have raised as arguments for the modernization of Aristotelian virtues, certain theorists have proposed entirely distinct sets of virtues explicitly oriented towards environmental decision making. Ronald Sandler represents a pronounced evolution from eudaimonistic ethics. His own account of moral theory suggests that an appropriate environmental virtue ethics must fulfill several criteria: it must serve as a legitimate means to "critique...environmentally unsustainable practices," provide concrete guidance for actions in situations concerning "relationships with the natural environment," and it must provide "justifications that are efficacious in moving people."<sup>13</sup> Sandler's theory reflects much of the probable outcome of a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics when applied to environmental decisions, however, he critiques traditional virtue ethics according to the assumption that they are "disposed to treat nature as a mere resource to be optimised."<sup>14</sup> This opinion is not uncommon amongst moral theorists, with many discounting Aristotelian based theories as particularly negligent towards other forms of life, their only interests being the pursuit

---

<sup>12</sup>EN 5 1140b1

<sup>13</sup>Sandler, 479.

<sup>14</sup>Sandler, 483.

of human flourishing. Sandler instead advocates that virtue ethics can be reconciled as non-anthropocentric under the condition that “it is not the case that only humans are morally considerable.”<sup>15</sup>

His proposal to improve upon virtue ethical conceptions of moral considerability is predicated upon a shift to biocentrism, the belief that all living entities possess moral worth. His approach is “nonreductive in the variety of moral considerability,”<sup>16</sup> indicating a belief in biocentric egalitarianism: that no one life form possesses any inherent or hierarchical worth above another. Instead, each virtue in action must conform to circumstantial information when responding to dilemmas while also considering all moral agents involved with equal scrutiny.<sup>17</sup> In many ways, this echoes the limited unity of Aristotelian virtue ethics as the virtuous person must be willing to adapt their actions according to the situation. Sandler, however, relies on a “pluralistic teleological account of what makes a character trait a virtue,”<sup>18</sup> invoking the teleological worth of all living beings as justification for his biocentric egalitarianism. For Sandler, a virtue is a character trait relevant to actions both independent of and concerning other moral agents,<sup>19</sup> meaning one must observe equal respect for all members of a biotic community regardless of their species pertinence.

Sandler’s reliance on teleological pluralism is problematic for the application of any virtue ethical theory as it contradicts the foundational premise that virtue ethics need not rely on teleological accounts of morality to justify actions. While it certainly signals virtue to compel a moral agent to respect other life and act upon dispositions such as compassion and care, to insist upon any rule of moral ranking or moral qualification lends his theory to a practically applied deadlock in many situations. For instance, any form of agriculture impacts the biotic community surrounding it. Sandler’s virtue ethics would compel the individual to deem the moral worth of all members of this biotic community as equal to that of humans. Would it be sensible to then declare all forms of agriculture a vicious manifestation of human activity for this reason? The neo-Aristotelian would conversely agree that one must temper one’s engagement in agriculture or farming. Livestock, for example, place an unnecessary strain on the environment, and so the neo-Aristotelian might insist that one temper one’s cravings for a juicy hamburger in favor of a hearty lentil soup. This choice conforms to our neo-Aristotelian interpretation of temperance as it is both environmentally sensible and better for one’s health. Yet, despite the sustainability of growing lentils as opposed to beef, the Sandlerian virtue ethicist might be inclined to oppose even this action as the growth of lentils will still surely negatively impact the biotic community surrounding it, whether by the appropriation of habitat, harmful pesticides or something of this sort. Sandler’s own contention that humans “must appropriate [living things] to survive,”<sup>20</sup> seems to summarize his conflicting pursuits of biocentric egalitarianism and human flourishing; appropriation of other living things is inevitable for humankind, so how could one ever treat the moral considerability of all living things as equal in light of this fact?

Sandler’s criticism of fundamentally eudaimonistic virtue theories hinges upon what he perceives as a viciously anthropocentric tendency to instrumentalize all life external to the human species. In contrast, the Aristotelian tradition is itself opposed to the

---

<sup>15</sup>Sandler, 115.

<sup>16</sup>Sandler, 41.

<sup>17</sup>Sandler, 41.

<sup>18</sup>Sandler, 41.

<sup>19</sup>Sandler, 37.

<sup>20</sup>Sandler, 73.

use of moral ranking or valuation as an end for any action. It conversely proposes “flourishing [as] the end we pursue throughout our lives,”<sup>21</sup> indicating that the only supposed teleological end of neo-Aristotelian ethics is the individual capacity to flourish. This premise may seem egocentric, though it aims to provide concrete foundations for virtuous action. Individual conceptions of flourishing may differ, though to adhere to the Aristotelian conception of eudaimonia, one must recognize that there is no inherent egocentrism or anthropocentrism in such a proposition. Aristotle’s account of the virtues instead focuses on human nature as “[placing] boundaries on what can count as genuinely human flourishing.”<sup>22</sup> Modern virtue ethics often ignore the practical capacity of virtue ethical theories to encourage legitimately virtuous actions in individuals. Sandler himself insists that an environmental virtue ethics must be capable of providing concrete guidance and legitimate justification to the individual, though to propose a doctrine of biocentric egalitarianism seems to disregard this condition as evidenced by the prior example. Categories of moral consideration, whether hierarchical or not, imply a need for moral calculus in decision-making, such that right actions become incredibly difficult to discern. The Aristotelian pursuit of eudaimonia differently provides a rational motivating end which is conducive to being environmentally sensitive under a modernized interpretation of temperance concerning all manner of pleasures and comforts.

### III. Defining Environmentalism

Within this defense of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics’ superiority in environmental decision-making, it must be acknowledged that there exist several interpretations of environmentalism. Doctrines of environmentalism may be most commonly associated with a belief in ecocentrism, implying the inherent worth of the general ecological system regardless of its utility to human ends.<sup>23</sup> Radically biocentric perspectives, similar to Sandler’s, reject the dualism of humanity and the environment, deeming humans inseparable from the broader ecosystem.<sup>24</sup> For the sake of practical applications of virtue ethics with reference to the environment, it is fruitful to identify one unifying principle which underlies all environmental thinking: sustainability.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise put, the end of the environmental movement seeks to guide human activity such that it does “not reduce environmental and economic options open to future generations.”<sup>26</sup>

The premise of sustainability reflects Sandler’s own criteria for an environmental virtue ethics, since it provides a means to evaluate one’s decisions according to a desire for sustainable practices which provides a justifiable critique for wasteful human activities. Moreover, this simple principle better fulfills his remaining criteria than his own theory; the principle of biocentric egalitarianism can provide no clear and concrete guidance for action when practiced by individuals who disagree with the principle of moral ranking or deontological rulings. It also seems particularly inefficacious in its capacity to motivate people to conduct themselves with environmentally sensitive virtue; recent research suggests a pervasive human tendency to care more for the well-being of other biotic life according to an anthropomorphic standard, meaning humans tend to care only for

---

<sup>21</sup>Snow.

<sup>22</sup>Snow.

<sup>23</sup>Pepper, 15.

<sup>24</sup>Pepper, 17.

<sup>25</sup>Pepper, 10.

<sup>26</sup>Pepper, 16.

those beings with which they identify.<sup>27</sup> Sandler's theory neglects this point. It would be notably difficult to guide human activities according to this biocentric standard given societal perceptions of the worth of non-human life, as this would entail convincing the whole of humanity to equate the moral worth of the least anthropomorphic species, a jellyfish for example, with that of a chimpanzee, an unlikely feat indeed.

Eudaimonistic virtue ethics can instead account for these common perceptions in guiding environmental decisions. The neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist with a modernized definition of temperance and the practical wisdom to perceive sustainability as a motivating factor for all temperate decisions hence fulfills Sandler's own criteria for an environmental virtue ethics. A virtuously temperate agent would be well-equipped to critique decisions for their sustainability and perceive occasions upon which human activity acts viciously intemperate in its disregard for the waste incurred by certain practices. This neo-Aristotelian interpretation also provides concrete guidance for one's actions by disregarding the implications of moral rankings, instead employing a limited unity of the virtues with a eudaimonistic end to perceive right action in environmental decisions. The pluralistically teleological account of virtues premised upon biocentric egalitarianism fruitlessly narrows the realm of ethical decisions regarding the environment in such a way that diminishes its efficacy due to its insistence on moral considerations in virtuous decisions.

For example, consider any mountaineers intent on scaling Mount Everest. The culture surrounding mountaineering is often regarded as one of environmental sensitivity. Yet, the tourist culture of this undertaking is largely contributing to the rapid decline of the mountain's condition. The neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist would first question the intentionality of the prospective mountaineer. One's mastery of a limited unity of the twelve Aristotelian virtues would first require that, under the scrutiny of legitimate practical wisdom, the intent to scale the mountain must be founded in an individual's quest for eudaimonia, and not in trivial pursuits of things like social status. The modernized definition of temperance would require that, should one want to scale the mountain for the explicit craving of social approbation incurred by the act, one should not undertake the activity for its unsustainable and intemperate nature. A traditional Aristotelian understanding of virtue might not be so inclined to object to this activity in spite of its wastefulness, as harmful practices of indulgence regarding bodily pleasures are not implicated in this situation.

A pluralistic teleological account would also struggle to provide concrete guidance or critique of such an endeavor. It is certainly damaging to the mountain's ecosystem to wastefully proliferate tourist culture up to the mountain's peak, however, this ecosystem is sparse and hardy, so the biotic community of the mountain suffers relatively little from this human activity. Thus, placing an emphasis on the action's negative impacts on living entities provides little motivation for action. One might perhaps evoke Sandler's virtues of restitutive justice and nonmaleficence as a means of accounting for the presented objections to his theory's applicability.<sup>28</sup> To act with nonmaleficence would require that one have no ill-intent towards the environment in their actions. Furthermore, restitutive justice would require that one restore the condition of the mountain adequately such that the impact on the biotic community be justifiably compensated. Though, the same case must be made for the neo-Aristotelian agent under these circumstances.

The logical conclusion of a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist with reference to scaling Mount Everest would be as follows: once having determined the desire to climb Mount

---

<sup>27</sup>Batt.

<sup>28</sup>Sandler, 82.

Everest a virtuous endeavor and necessary for human flourishing, the practice must also be sustainable to offer the same experience to future generations. It would thus not stand to leave the mountain in worse condition than before one had scaled it, so the virtuous agent would have to engage in restitutive action to restore the condition of the mountain to its prior state, or conduct one's activity such that the condition of the mountain never be unduly negatively impacted. In spite of the fact that this conclusion might be arrived at according to Sandler's environmentally responsive virtues, his proliferated typology of virtues limits his theory's practically applied capacity to make this case, as it places unnecessary restrictions on moral reasoning and overloads the individual with senselessly specific virtues which would result by the application of a limited unity of traditional Aristotelian virtues with the modernized definition of temperance.

Sandler's most compelling critique is that an environmental virtue ethics must provide efficacious justification to a person on how to act regarding the environment.<sup>29</sup> Though, to continually adapt and modify virtue ethics theories works to the contrary of this goal. Additionally, to incorporate pluralistic teleological accounts of morality with the intent of justifying and guiding right action with good dispositions is denotative of a fault in practical wisdom. This apparently redundant proliferation of virtues on the grounds of environmental sensitivity might not strike the reader as trivial; the proliferation of virtues with good intent could encourage more holistic ethical theories. Although, to once more invoke Sandler's own contention that an adequate environmental virtue ethics must inspire the individual to pursue right action regarding the environment, this proliferation may lead to hindering the purported efficacy of such theories. In the aforementioned example, it is clear that to practice all twelve neo-Aristotelian virtues with limited unity and practical wisdom would result in outcomes exhibiting dispositions which many philosophers now call virtues. Sandler's own typology of environmental virtue suggests incorporating a whole host of further dispositions under the blanket of virtues. While most of these character traits can lend to a virtuous life and enable the individual to achieve eudaimonia, these traits are predominantly the by-products of practicing said limited unity of neo-Aristotelian virtues. It cannot suffice to declare traits such as aesthetic sensibility and care as virtues, as these traits are neither means of two vicious ends, nor are they themselves dispositions which, when practiced with virtue, can capacitate the individual to achieve eudaimonia. Achieving a state of neo-Aristotelian virtue would provide the individual an understanding of when such traits are conducive to eudaimonistic ends, and guide the agent's understanding of the extent to which one should possess and exhibit each trait in different situations. Furthermore, these traits do not reflect the interplay of the virtues, as they are largely uninvolved in most decisions that might confront the individual. For example, one could not argue the necessity of practicing optimism in all matters of temperance. Still, when one might benefit from a positive outlook on a problem, one might manifest a state of optimism as virtue would see fit.

Virtue ethics benefit from regressing to more fundamental understandings of the ability for eudaimonistic ends to justify environmental virtue, predicated on this modernized interpretation of temperance. Sandler is correct that virtue ethics must provide solid guidance for actions. For this fact, most contemporary virtue ethics theorists seek to proliferate the character traits considered virtuous in order to address the evolving landscape of climate issues. While well intentioned, this confuses the practical capacity for virtue ethics to inspire authentic change in human activity. Sandler's own theory fails this criterion in its advocacy for a pluralistically teleological ethical

---

<sup>29</sup>Sandler, 115.

system. Successfully addressing environmental issues thus requires conducting oneself in a way that allows for both individual and collective flourishing while also ensuring the sustainable prospects of future generations, ends that are incurred by adhering to a limitedly unified neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.

## References

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge, MA:Hackett Publishing Company, Incorporated, 2014. Accessed March 11, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Batt, Sarah. *Human Attitudes Towards Animals in Relation to Species Similarity to Humans: A Multivariate Approach*. Bioscience Horizons, 2009.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2001.
- McAleer, Sean. *An Aristotelian Account of Virtue Ethics: An Essay in Moral Taxonomy*. Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, 2007.
- Pepper, David. *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction*. Taylor and Francis Group, 1996.
- Sandler, Ronald L. *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics*. Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Snow, N.E. *Proliferating Virtues: A Clear and Present Danger?*. In: Grimi E. (eds) *Virtue Ethics: Retrospect and Prospect*. Springer, Cham, 2019.

## *Zhuangzi*: The Fruitless Tree

Ian Withy-Berry  
Swarthmore College

### Abstract

The *Zhuangzi* (*Zhuāngzǐ*), an ancient Chinese text composed between the 4th and 3rd century BCE, tells four stories of a “useless tree.” Through close textual analysis and in conversation with four other authors, I argue that the motif of the “useless tree” has implications of philosophical significance. Despite the inconsistency of the *Zhuangzi* as a whole, the implications of the motif and its representative, the Ailanthus Altissima ( *chū*), provide a consistent and coherent philosophical position throughout the text. The *Zhuangzi* undermines normative use-value moral judgements through a radical perspectivism and reveals the “great use” (*dà yòng*) of cultivating absolute uselessness. This valuable uselessness can be cultivated within humans *alongside* the Zhuangzian principle of “nonaction” (*wúwéi*), as in the Spiritlike Person (*shénrén*). Today, nothing better demonstrates the usefulness of uselessness than the study of philosophy.

The *Zhuangzi* (*Zhuāngzǐ*) is a philosophical and religious text comprised of conversations and short stories and written in 3rd and 4th century BCE China. The text’s name is derived from its attributed author, Zhuang Zhou (*zhuāngzhōu*, 4th century). Although the received text totals thirty-three chapters, modern scholars hold that only the first seven of these, known as the “Inner Chapters” (*nèi piān*) were written by one hand.<sup>1</sup> This authorial inconsistency has prompted disputation over the *Zhuangzi*’s overall philosophical cohesion as ideas advanced in the Inner Chapters aren’t necessarily persistent throughout the rest of the text. Despite one such challenge, I argue that the motif of the “useless tree,” stemming from the Inner Chapters and branching out beyond them, expounds a consistent idea throughout. Namely, the trope of the “useless tree” puts forward the idea that uselessness entails freedom and flourishing through the employment of a radical perspectivism.

Before a tree can grow, the soil must be tilled and the seed planted. To understand the significance of the “useless tree,” the historical environment must first be discerned. Active and competitive peoples under the Eastern Zhou dynasty (*dōngzhōu*, 770–256 BCE) took advantage of man and nature alike. The decentralized king of the Eastern Zhou held little power and was unable to maintain order. The first half of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, labeled the “Spring and Autumn Period,” (*chūnqiūshídài*, 772–481 BCE) was one of feudal erosion. A number of Dukes (*gōng*) manned their own armies and fought one another. But the period that followed, the “Warring States Period” (*zhànguóshídài*, 403–221 BCE), was distinctly worse. The era was plagued by absolute chaos, farms terrorized, citizens enlisted, and robbers rampant.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of extreme competition, advantage, synonymous with profit (*lì*), became the normative ethical telos for vast populations of people. In the framework of such an ethic, each action and object was evaluated on its ability to produce or not produce

<sup>1</sup>A. S. Cua, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 911.

<sup>2</sup>Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2011), 13.

profit. From an environment of hyper-competition, the ethical telos of profit assumed its place as a standard or norm for those who didn't adopt it risked their very lives. Hence, the telos gain an authoritative status. This authoritative ethical telos of profit was applied to evaluations of nature and humanity alike whereby each could be attributed a particular use-value which indicated their worth. Consequently, exploitation and abuse characterized the things that were found of most use. The trees of the Warring States were familiar with the axes of being profitable:

[I].

In the Jingshi region of Song grow the catalpas, cypresses, and mulberries. The tall ones are chopped down for monkey perches. Those that are three or four spans around are chopped down to make pillars for stately homes. Those that are seven or eight spans around are felled to make coffin shells for the wealthy. Thus they fail to fully live out their natural lifespans, and die before their time under axes and saws. This is the trouble that comes from being worth something.<sup>3</sup>

Trees that had a worth, that could be used for profit, fell to the axes of men and saws. Yet, within these forests of classical China, the *Zhuangzi* plants a tree that flourishes free from exploitation and grows to the Heavens.<sup>4</sup>

Despite being firmly rooted in the developing thought of the Warring States Period, the ideas of the *Zhuangzi* grew in a different direction. The philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* sought to subvert commonly held beliefs to lessen worries and bring about joyful living. One method it used to do so is a radical perspectivism, the theory that truth and knowledge is shaped by one's particular perspective. Through taking into account a variety of perspectives, the text points out the shaky foundations upon which many judgements stand. In particular, the *Zhuangzi* employs the perspective of a tree to undermine the prevalent normative ethical telos and advise the cultivation of uselessness for the attainment of freedom from for-profit exploitation. This refutation applies to the human as well, but in line with the *Zhuangzi*, I intend to take up the perspective of the tree to establish the trunk of its wisdom before branching out to its meaning for humans.

The "useless tree" is first mentioned by Huizi at the end of the first chapter:

[II.1].

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, "I have a huge tree that people call the Stinktree. The trunk is swollen and gnarled, impossible to align with any level or ruler. The branches are twisted and bent, impossible to align to any T-square or carpenter's arc. Even if it were growing right in the road, a carpenter would not give it so much as a second glance. And your words are similarly big but useless, which is why they are rejected by everyone who hears them."<sup>5</sup>

Huizi describes a huge tree that is composed of a gnarled trunk and twisted branches, impossible to align to any tool, and of no interest to a carpenter. What Brook Ziporyn translates as the "Stinktree" (*chū*) is the Chinese etymology for the "Ailanthus Altissima"

<sup>3</sup>Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2020), 42.

<sup>4</sup>Throughout this paper, "Zhuang Zhou" will reference the sole author of the Inner Chapters, "the *Zhuangzi*" will reference the entirety of the received text, and "Zhuangzi" will reference the character titled such throughout the stories provided.

<sup>5</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 8.

(also known as the “Tree of Heaven”), a tree native to northeast and central China.<sup>6</sup> According to Huizi’s description, the Ailanthus grows tall remarkably quickly and its wood often twists and cracks during drying.<sup>7</sup> Huizi presents the Ailanthus as a tree without the fruits of utility, “rejected by everyone” who encounters it. He views the Ailanthus in the same way as almost everyone else from the period, with the sole interest in benefit or profit. Indeed, he brings up the Ailanthus to critique Zhuangzi’s “useless words.” Yet, Zhuangzi remains at ease in the face of this criticism:

[II.2].

Zhuangzi said, “. . . You, on the other hand, have this big tree and you worry that it’s useless. How you could loaf and wander, doing a whole lot of nothing there at its side! How far-flung and unfettered you’d be, dozing there beneath it! It will never be cut down by ax or saw. Nothing will harm it. Since it has nothing for which it can be used, what could entrap or afflict it?”<sup>8</sup>

Zhuangzi doesn’t retort by dismissing the analogy that connects his words to the useless tree. Instead, Zhuangzi retorts by questioning the assumed worthlessness of the Ailanthus. Huizi judged the tree through his desire for profit and use but Zhuangzi presents an alternative perspective. There is worth in an enormous but “useless” tree. Its great shade will provide a comfortable spot to sleep in. Without useful wood, no ax or saw will harm it. Further, Zhuangzi suggests that, by virtue of its being useless, nothing can entrap or afflict the Ailanthus. Thus, Zhuangzi establishes three ideas of the Ailanthus that will be maintained and developed: (i) from an alternative perspective, Huizi’s judgement of the Ailanthus as “worthless” and “useless” is wrong; (ii) nothing can entrap or afflict the Ailanthus; (iii) one could do “a whole lot of nothing” (*wúwéi*) at the Ailanthus’ side.

In the fourth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Huizi’s prediction becomes a reality. A carpenter finds a tree growing right in the road, yet doesn’t give it so much as a second glance:

[III.1].

Carpenter Stoney was traveling in Qi when he came upon the tree of the shrine at the Qu Yuan bend. It was over a hundred arm spans around, so large that thousands of oxen could shade themselves beneath it. It overstretched the surrounding hills, its lowest branches hundreds of feet from the ground, at least a dozen of which could have been hollowed out to make into ships. It was surrounded by marveling sightseers, but the carpenter walked past it without a second look.

When his apprentice finally got tired of admiring it, he caught up with Carpenter Stoney and said, “Since taking up my axe to follow you, Master, I have never seen a tree of such fine material as this! And yet you don’t even deign to look twice at it or pause beneath it. Why?” Carpenter Stoney said, “Stop! Say no more! This is worthless lumber! As a ship it would soon sink, as a coffin it would soon rot, as a tool it would soon break, as a door it would leak sap, as a pillar it would bring infestation. This is a talentless, worthless tree. It is precisely because it is so useless that it has lived so long.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Galvany, “Discussing Usefulness: Trees As Metaphor In The Zhuangzi,” 78.

<sup>7</sup>Shiu Ying Hu, “Ailanthus Altissima,” *Arnoldia*, 2nd ser., 39, no. 39 (March 1979): 38.

<sup>8</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 8.

<sup>9</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 40-41.

Carpenter Stoney and his apprentice encounter a tree that is big but useless: the Ailanthus. The apprentice sees that its branches were large enough to make entire ships and, therefore, expects such a concentration of wood to be exceedingly profitable. However, Stoney, as a seasoned carpenter, recognizes the tree as “worthless lumber.” There is *nothing* that the tree could be used for—not ships, coffins, tools, doors, or pillars. Despite differing judgements, both Stoney and his apprentice applied the same normative ethic through evaluating the tree by its use-value, its ability to bring about a desired end, namely profit. Seeing that the tree has absolutely no use-value, Stoney asserts his judgement over the Ailanthus: “This is a talentless, worthless tree.” Thus, Stoney subjects the Ailanthus to an ethic that is both authoritative and teleological. It is an authoritative ethic because it lays claim beyond the perspective of Stoney himself and a teleological ethic because his use-value judgements determine what is good in light of his desired end. Rune Svarverud, author of “The Usefulness of Uselessness,” took carpenter Stoney to be in tune with the patterns of Heaven (*tiān*).<sup>10</sup> Yet, as this analysis shows, Stoney’s attitude was not different from that of Huizi nor the countless citizens of Warring States China, who exploited their natural forests. Hence, Stoney’s normative use-value ethic is none other than the standard viewpoint of those throughout the lands. Consistent with the former story, this attitude doesn’t go unaddressed when the Ailanthus responds:

[III.2].

Back home that night, the tree appeared to Carpenter Stoney in a dream. It said to him, “What do you want to compare me to, one of those cultivated trees? The hawthorn, the pear, the orange, the rest of those fructiferous trees and shrubs—when their fruit is ripe they get plucked, and that is an insult. Their large branches are bent, their small branches are pruned. Thus do their abilities embitter their lives. That is why they die young, failing to fully live out their Heaven-given lifespans. They batter themselves with the vulgar conventions of the world, as do all the other things of the world. As for me, I’ve been working on being useless for a long time. It almost killed me, but I’ve finally managed it—and it is of great use to me! If I were useful, do you think I could have grown to be so great? “Moreover, you and I are both things, objects—how then should we objectify each other? We are members of the same class, namely, things—is either of us in a position to classify and evaluate the other? How could a worthless man with one foot in the grave know what is or isn’t a worthless tree?”<sup>11</sup>

Already here, the *Zhuangzi* subverts the innate human point of view by presenting a speaking tree with a thought process and perspective of its own. Through a dream, the Ailanthus sets forth a series of questions to the sleeping carpenter that undermines Stoney’s authoritative teleological ethic. The Ailanthus was aware that Stoney measured the Ailanthus against the many trees that had been cultivated by man for their use-value, the “useful trees.” Yet, from the perspective of the tree, the result of this comparison is really the opposite. These same “useful trees” are bent and pruned, chopped down by axes and hatchets, and deprived of their Heaven-given lifespans. Being useful, they are exploited, abused, and killed for use by men. Unlike them, the Ailanthus is not a means to anyone’s end. Free from the exploitation entailed by usefulness, the Ailanthus is able to grow “so large that thousands of oxen could shade themselves beneath it.” This external

<sup>10</sup>Svarverud, Rune. “The Usefulness of Uselessness: The Realm of Useless Trees According to Zhuangzi.” *Studies in Chinese Language and Culture. Festschrift in Honour of Christoph Harbsmeier on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday* (2006): 162.

<sup>11</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 41.

uselessness is of “great use” (*dàyòng*) to the Ailanthus, for the perception of being useless allows it to flourish on its own.

Gil Morejón, author of “Zhuangzi’s Trees: Insubordinate Joy and Heavenly Becoming,” argued that the motif of the “useless tree” articulated an ethic set against teleology itself.<sup>12</sup> While grounding for an anti-teleological ethical telos may be found elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, Morejón’s argument cannot be made on the basis of the “useless tree” trope so long as the Ailanthus lays claim to a “great use.” This is disclosed by the presumed paradox of the “usefulness of uselessness” introduced the story above. The presumed paradox is resolved through the recognition of judgements stemming from different perspectives. “Uselessness” means that, from the perspective of others, the Ailanthus has no use-value because there is nothing profitable or beneficial about it. “Usefulness” means that, from the perspective of the Ailanthus, this perceived uselessness frees it from abuse and allows it to endure. Any mention to “usefulness” presupposes an ethical teleology of some kind, *even* the “usefulness of uselessness.” The Ailanthus of this story has a clear end: it seeks to live out its Heaven-given lifespan, and the means to doing so are to be found in its perceived uselessness. Hence, the Ailanthus undermines Stoney’s authoritative teleological ethic through a perspectivist assertion of two contradictory ethical aims: profit for Stoney and life for the Ailanthus.

The Ailanthus conveys that the cultivation of uselessness is necessary for safety from exploitation. In saying, “I’ve been working on being useless for a long time,” the Ailanthus implies that it had been useful, only to then deliberately “work on” (*qiu*) and then “manage” (*dé*) it. This account is consistent with modern botanical research on the genus of the Ailanthus. In premodern China, the Ailanthus family was useful for multi-purpose wood, treating illnesses, and silk production.<sup>13</sup> In order to negate these uses, the Ailanthus of the *Zhuangzi* managed to alter its inner composition and “vital energy” (*qi*).<sup>14</sup> As the means to living out its Heaven-given lifespan, the Ailanthus cultivated uselessness. Following this, the Ailanthus directly challenges Stoney’s authoritative ethic: how is it possible for a *man* to evaluate *a tree*? From Stoney’s perspective, the Ailanthus was useless; but from its own, the opposite was true. Hence, there is no normative basis by which Stoney, or anyone else, can make authoritative claims that span beyond their own perspective. As the perspectives change, so do perceived teleologies. How can concrete and universal valuations be made if a simple shift of perspective crumbles them? According to the Ailanthus, they can’t. The story concludes:

[III.3].

Carpenter Stoney awoke and told his dream to his apprentice. The apprentice said, “If it’s trying to be useless, what’s it doing with a shrine around it?”

Carpenter Stoney said, “Hush! Don’t talk like that! Those people came to it for refuge on their own initiative. In fact, the tree considers it a great disgrace to be surrounded by this uncomprehending crowd. If they hadn’t made it a shrine, they could easily have gone the other way and started carving away at it. What it protects, what protects it, is not this crowd, but something totally different. To praise it for fulfilling its responsibility in the role it happens to play—that would really be missing the point!”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Gil Morejón, “Zhuangzi’s Trees: Insubordinate Joy and Heavenly Becoming,” 11.

<sup>13</sup>Ying Hu, “Ailanthus Altissima,” 42.

<sup>14</sup>Livia Kohn, *Chuang-Tzu: The Tao of Perfect Happiness*, (Woodstock: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2011) 156.

<sup>15</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 41.

The apprentice, who had been amazed upon encountering the tree, levels a fair question: why the shrine? The Ailanthus would prefer to be on its own, since men bring the axes of subordination. Yet, the tree has no choice but to accept a shrine once humans begin to crowd in awe of its size. This point of almost nil use-value is likely the time at which it had almost been killed. Shortly thereafter, the Ailanthus attained absolute uselessness and became a shrine. These two events are not disjoint. Trees, especially the tallest of them, in Ancient China were viewed as connections to Heaven.<sup>16</sup> By means of uselessness, the tree grew large enough to reach Heaven and hence received a shrine. It protects its Heaven-given lifespan and Heaven protects it from the axes of men. Hence, “what it protects, what protects it, is not this crowd” but Heaven itself. To praise it for a function or worth that man has attributed to it, would be to miss the point of its Heavenly uselessness.

The Ailanthus has already demonstrated the safety of uselessness, but the Zhuangzi goes further to demonstrate the danger of usefulness:

[IV].

The mountain tree plunders itself. The candle fat scorches itself. The cinnamon tree is edible, and thus it gets chopped down. The lacquer tree is useful, and thus it is cut down. Everyone knows how useful usefulness is, but no one seems to know how useful uselessness is.<sup>17</sup>

It is because of their worth that trees and things alike are broken down. To recall: “This is the trouble that comes from being worth something.”<sup>18</sup> It is key to see that, possibly holding influence from the ethical egoist Yang Zhu (*yángzhū*, ca. 400 BCE), it is only for oneself that uselessness is useful. People seek a useful tree believing it will benefit them and are disappointed upon finding a useless one. Yet, for the useless tree, there is great worth in not being cut down. Cinnamon and lacquer are the trees that carpenter Stoney had tried to evaluate the Ailanthus in contrast to. These are the trees fallen for the uses of man.

The account of the “usefulness of uselessness” has, thus far, been occupied with the perspective of the Ailanthus. However, it isn’t reserved to the botanical:

[V].

Sir Shoestrap the Southland Unk was traveling in the hills of Shang when he came across a huge tree. He marveled at it, for the horses from a thousand chariots could have cooled themselves in its shade. “What sort of tree is this?” said Master Shoestrap. “It must be of unusually fine material.” Looking up at its branches, he saw that they were too twisted and gnarled to be used for beams or pillars. Looking down at its trunk, he saw that it was too splotched and split to be used for a coffin. It stung and stabbed the tongue when licked and crazed and inebriated the mind for three days when sniffed. Master Shoestrap said, “It turns out to be a worthless tree, and thus it has been able to grow so huge. Ah! This is the worthlessness that the Spiritlike Person relies on!”<sup>19</sup>

This huge tree, with twisted branches and a splotched trunk, is undoubtedly the Ailanthus and the story mentions another attribute of its genus: its intoxicating

<sup>16</sup>Galvany, “Discussing Usefulness: Trees As Metaphor In The Zhuangzi,” 88.

<sup>17</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 43.

<sup>18</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 41-2.

<sup>19</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 41.

smell, described by some to be like “rancid peanut butter.” More importantly, the story establishes a deep connection between the worthlessness of the Ailanthus and that which the Spiritlike Person (*shénrén*) relies on. The “Spiritlike Person” is the least common among the four role models of the *Zhuangzi*.<sup>20</sup> Described by a madman, Spiritlike Persons “live by breathing in the wind and drinking in the dew. They ride upon the air and clouds, charioting upon soaring dragons, wandering beyond the four seas. They just concentrate their spirits and straightaway all things are free from sickness.”<sup>21</sup> Returning to the story of Sir Shoestrap’s encounter with the Ailanthus, Shoestrap acknowledges both the tree’s “fine material” and how its worthlessness has allowed it to grow so large. Shoestrap doesn’t render harsh judgement on the tree; rather, he suggests that this same worthlessness is common to the Spiritlike Person. Insofar as the two flourish through the freedom of uselessness, the Ailanthus and the Spiritlike Person are analogous. Thus, the Spiritlike Person is similarly absolutely useless and incapable of being exploited by the ends of others. For similar reasons to the Ailanthus, the Spiritlike Person is connected to Heaven. This story doesn’t offer a clear depiction of what the “usefulness of uselessness” for humanity looks like, but simply establishes its existence.

The landscape of the Warring States period saw the cutting down and abusing of trees and humans alike. Multitudes of people were exploited for profit throughout China at the time, whether by dukes, ministers, commanders, or robbers. Facing similar dangers of being used, uselessness allowed humans, as it had for the Ailanthus, to flourish without fear of exploitation. The worth of uselessness for humanity is not restricted to the Spiritlike human as demonstrated by the story of “Outspread the Discombobulated” (*zhīlǐ shū*).<sup>22</sup> Deformed, Outspread was unable to serve in the state military and instead, he received rations from the state for his disabilities. Upon observing this, Sir Shoestrap concluded that:

[VI].

A discombobulated physical form was sufficient to allow him to nourish his body, so that he was able to live out his natural lifespan. How much more can be accomplished with discombobulated virtuosities!

Zhuang Zhou, author of the Inner Chapters, makes a crucial distinction here that has been seldom addressed. It is *not* the case that, “the uselessness of a crippled man is equal to the uselessness of trees.”<sup>23</sup> Outspread’s “uselessness” had value: he was overlooked by the nation’s militia and his life was spared. However, this is only the result of “a discombobulated physical form.” There exists a higher level of uselessness, one wherein “more can be accomplished,” that of “discombobulated virtuosities.” The examples of “discombobulated virtuosities” are the Ailanthus and Spiritlike Person. How exactly do these two uselessness’ differ? I hold that the final mention to the Ailanthus, found in Chapter 20, offers an answer:

[VII].

Zhuangzi was traveling in the mountains when he came upon a huge tree, luxuriantly

<sup>20</sup>Those others being the “Utmost Person” (*zhiren*), the “Genuine Person” (*zhēnrén*), and the “Sagely Person” (*shèngrén*).

<sup>21</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 6.

<sup>22</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 42.

<sup>23</sup>Svarverud. “The Usefulness of Uselessness: The Realm of Useless Trees According to Zhuangzi,” 165.

overgrown with branches and leaves. A woodcutter stopped beside it, but in the end chose not to fell it. Asked the reason, he said, "There is nothing it can be used for." Zhuangzi said, "This tree is able to live out its natural lifespan because of its worthlessness." When he left the mountains, he lodged for a night at the home of an old friend. His friend was delighted, and ordered a servant to kill a goose for dinner. The servant said, "There is one that can honk and one that cannot. Which should I kill?" The host said, "Kill the one that cannot honk."

The next day, Zhuangzi's disciple said to him, "The tree we saw yesterday could live out its natural lifespan because of its worthlessness, while our host's goose was killed for its worthlessness. What position would you take, Master?"

Zhuangzi said, "I would probably take a position somewhere between worthiness and worthlessness. But though that might look right, it turns out not to be—it still leads to entanglements. It would be another thing entirely to float and drift along, mounted on only the intrinsic powers of the Course. . . ."<sup>24</sup>

Zhuangzi and his disciple are at the foot of the Ailanthus. They watch as a carpenter, maybe Stoney himself, evaluates the tree to be useless. Zhuangzi states the trope that has been repeated in every story thus far, "This tree is able to live out its natural lifespan because of its worthlessness." But the story continues, describing a goose that was killed for being unable to honk. Seeing this, Zhuangzi's disciple asks why the goose that couldn't honk was chosen to be eaten, even if its failure to honk made it of less use? Is uselessness truly safety or is it danger? This one question threatens both the viability and the consistency of the motif of the "useless tree."

Following the thinking of renowned Sinologist A. C. Graham, a number of commentators have taken the story to contradict the motif of the Ailanthus from the Inner Chapters.<sup>25</sup> Because Zhuangzi does not blatantly reassert the "usefulness of uselessness," these scholars argue that this new story has abandoned the previously unquestioned praise of uselessness. For them, "floating and drifting along" has no relation to uselessness whatsoever. However, these scholars have missed the forest for the tree.

When the stories of uselessness as demonstrated by those other than the Ailanthus are taken into account, the presumed inconsistency of the story is disproven as Zhuangzi is shown to be advising for nothing other than the absolute uselessness of the Spiritlike Person. While Zhuangzi does not outright advocate for the cultivation of uselessness as the author of the Inner Chapters had, he does not refute the idea either. Instead, he advises to "mount on the intrinsic powers of the Course," but who is the one that does so, that "floats and drifts along?" It is the absolutely useless Spiritlike Person introduced above that matches the description. When Zhuangzi continues his description, qualities of freedom, insubordination, and un-entanglement align with the qualities of the Spiritlike Person.<sup>26</sup> This connection, however, can only be tentative until the supposed contradiction is resolved. It is asked once again, is uselessness truly safety or is it danger? This time, the answer lies in a return to the story of Outspread the Discombobulated, wherein a distinction was noted between "a discombobulated physical form" and "discombobulated virtuosities."

<sup>24</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 157.

<sup>25</sup>A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book Chuang-tzū* (London: Allen Unwin, 1981), 117. Svarverud. "The Usefulness of Uselessness: The Realm of Useless Trees According to Zhuangzi," 167. Livia Kohn, *Chuang-Tzu: The Tao of Perfect Happiness*, 162.

<sup>26</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 157-8.

Outspread, with only the former, received rations and exemptions from military service. Yet, he wasn't entirely without use. He could still cook food. Having a use, Outspread wasn't entirely free from exploitation. Had another state invaded and enslaved the people, Outspread could still be used for his cooking ability. The Ailanthus, and the Spiritlike Person along with it, with "discombobulated virtuosity" had no use-value at all. Therefore, they were free from exploitation of *any* kind. The same distinction can be applied to the Outer Chapter story to solve the apparent contradiction. The Ailanthus is guaranteed safety because of its "discombobulated virtuosity" and nil use-value. The goose only had a discombobulated vocal tract. It still had *some* use; it could be cooked and eaten. It was not killed for being unable to honk; it was killed for its use of nutrition. The goose without a honk had not achieved the safety of *absolute* uselessness. With a use of some kind, it was cut down by man like the many "useful trees." John Major, author of "The Efficacy of Uselessness," despite not noticing the distinction from the Outspread passage in his analysis, termed the uselessness of Outspread and the goose as "contingent uselessness" and the uselessness of the Ailanthus and the Spiritlike Person as "absolute uselessness."<sup>27</sup> The latter entails freedom from entanglement and vulgar conventions while the former doesn't. To follow Zhuangzi's advice to be free from entanglement, one must cultivate absolute uselessness. No lower amount will suffice.

Thus, this final tale of the Ailanthus isn't one that contradicts the motif, but rather furthers the distinction originally written by Zhuang Zhou. The motif of the useless tree proves to be a consistent, coherent idea throughout the *Zhuangzi*. It has wielded a perspectivism to undermine claims to an authoritative teleological ethic and articulated the freedom from abuse, exploitation, and entanglement, of absolute uselessness. Yet there had been a third theme from the first story: uselessness' position next to *wúwéi*.

Zhuangzi, in the first story, had said of the Ailanthus, "How you could loaf and wander, doing a whole lot of nothing there at its side!"<sup>28</sup> Therein, *wúwéi* is translated as "doing a whole lot of nothing," but it would be a mistake to equate *wúwéi* with lazy inaction. Rather than sloth, *wúwéi* is better considered as a form of action through nonaction, that is, without effort and spontaneously. In the *Zhuangzi*, *wúwéi* is commonly depicted through stories of craftsmen who have reached a level of skill wherein they tap into the Heavenly to meet things as they are, doing their work free from abstractions and personal interests.<sup>29</sup> Thus, *wúwéi* and uselessness are likewise proven to be traits of the Spiritlike Person:

[VIII].

The marquis said, "I have studied the Course of the former kings and performed the same deeds as the great former rulers. . . And yet all the same I can't avoid being beset by misfortunes. That's what distresses me."

Master Marketsouth said, "It is because your technique for dispelling misfortunes is too shallow. The thick-coated fox and pattern-furred leopard are so still they can dwell in the mountains and forests. . . And yet for all that, they are still sometimes unable to escape the misfortune of falling into a net or a trap. Is this due to some transgression of theirs? No, it is a disaster brought upon them by their valuable hides. And is not the state of Lu precisely your hide? I would like you to peel the skin off your own body, cast away your hide, cleanse

<sup>27</sup>John S. Major, "The Efficacy of Uselessness: A Chuang-tzu Motif," *Philosophy East and West* 25, no. 3 (July 1975): 272, doi:10.2307/1398197.

<sup>28</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 9.

<sup>29</sup>Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 151.

your heart and mind until your desires are gone, leaving you wandering in the wilds where no one goes.”<sup>30</sup>

Master Marketsouth’s advice is the method by which one may become a Spiritlike Person, through the cultivation of both *wúwéi* and uselessness. As demonstrated through various skill stories (the most well-known of which is that of “Cook Ding”), to cleanse your heart-mind and wander where no one goes is the application of *wúwéi*. But, following an analogy to the fox, who is killed for its useful hide, the suggestion to “cast away your hide” is advocacy for absolute uselessness. Like the non-active person relaxing underneath the Ailanthus, uselessness and nonaction are cooperative traits of the Spiritlike Person. As stated above, Morejón developed the idea of an anti-teleological ethic throughout the *Zhuangzi*. This is the *wúwéi* of humanity rather than the uselessness of the Ailanthus. The Ailanthus only undermines authoritative teleological ethics and shares the insight of the cultivation of external uselessness for the personal use of life and growth. *Wúwéi* transcends the creation of such distinctions in the first place.

Svarverud concluded his essay on a note of pessimism, doubting the applicability of these stories by saying that, as the later authors abandoned the “usefulness of uselessness” for a “more this-worldly [philosophy, how] much more would that not be the case today?”<sup>31</sup> Svarverud had misjudged the usefulness of uselessness for Zhuang Zhou’s followers and, by my account, he has misjudged the usefulness of uselessness for those today.

One may be inclined to disregard the Ailanthus’s insight on the grounds that the harsh circumstances of the Warring States period are too distant from modern circumstances. While contemporary society may be less dangerous than Warring States China, use-value judgements and exploitation under a normative telos of profit are more pervasive than ever. Is not the modern education system intent on raising useful citizens? Lined in rows, much like a plantation, children are taught to “make themselves useful.” If their skills lie in the physical, they are to serve the military or clash one another in sport for the nation’s entertainment. If their skills lie in the sciences, they are to innovate for business. If they lack extraordinary skill, they are to serve those who have it. It’s no wonder that the cultivation of usefulness is pervasive within a society wherein the ethical telos of profit is accepted (and otherwise enforced) as authoritative. Those that fall out of line, that cannot be used, become outcasts, get imprisoned, or face economic hardship.<sup>32</sup> Hence, it is only right that those today may seek the safety of uselessness displayed by the Ailanthus. So what does it look like to be absolutely useless today? Morejón and Major offer examples of the usefulness of uselessness in a labor strike and the F-4 draft status respectively.<sup>33</sup> However, these examples display the worth of two forms of *contingent* uselessness. Instead, I hold this paper and you, its reader, to display the worth of uselessness.

The study of philosophy is commonly judged a “useless” pursuit. Facing similar challenges as the *Zhuangzi* of the first story had, countless students of philosophy and

<sup>30</sup>Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, 158.

<sup>31</sup>Svarverud. “The Usefulness of Uselessness: The Realm of Useless Trees According to Zhuangzi,” 167.

<sup>32</sup>It’s only fitting that in Chinese literature since the *Zhuangzi*, the Ailanthus, referred to as the “the good-for-nothing ailanthus stump sprout,” has become a metaphorical insult for a youth who is not bound to obligations. Ying Hu, “Ailanthus Altissima,” 41.

<sup>33</sup>Gil Morejón, “Zhuangzi’s Trees: Insubordinate Joy and Heavenly Becoming,” 6. Major, “The Efficacy of Uselessness: A Chuang-tzu Motif,” 265.

the rest of the humanities are berated with questions like “why study this instead of something *worth it*?”<sup>34</sup> While other disciplines ought to prove the ignorance latent within this question, philosophy need not. It’s true that, apart from a number of academics, there is little profit, power, or influence to be found within serious study. Yet, these are the signs of philosophy’s external uselessness. The very worth of philosophy lies in its uselessness. As renown philosopher Bertrand Russell once wrote, “Utility does not belong to philosophy. If the study of philosophy has any value at all for others than students of philosophy, it must be only indirectly, through its effects upon the lives of those who study it.”<sup>35</sup> Philosophy enables one to be free of conventional ethical (and other) assumptions and creates the possibility for personal growth through contemplation and argumentation. Rather than being cultivated and picked for their fruit, the true philosopher flourishes free from the axes of vulgar conventions. Hence, philosophy, like the Ailanthus, is fruitless. It is precisely for its uselessness that philosophy is of such great use.

In 1784, the Ailanthus Altissima was introduced to Philadelphia via England. Since its introduction, the Ailanthus has proliferated throughout Europe and the Americas. I ask, can the same not happen for its motif, the “usefulness of uselessness?”

---

<sup>34</sup>This question is primarily posed to undergraduate or graduate philosophy students yet may be applied to all people who spend any of their precious hours in philosophical contemplation.

<sup>35</sup>Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89.

## References

- Cua, A. S. *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013.
- Galvany, Albert. "Discussing Usefulness: Trees As Metaphor In The Zhuangzi." *Monumenta Serica* 57, no. 1 (2009): 71-97. doi:10.1179/mon.2009.57.1.002.
- Graham, A. C. *Chuang-Tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book Chuang-tzu*. London: Allen Unwin, 1981.
- Kohn, Livia. *Chuang-Tzu: The Tao of Perfect Happiness—Selections Annotated Explained*. Woodstock: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2011.
- Legge, James. *Texts of Taoism*. Vol. 39. Sacred Books of the East. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1891.
- Major, John S. "The Efficacy of Uselessness: A Chuang-tzu Motif." *Philosophy East and West* 25, no. 3 (July 1975): 265-79. doi:10.2307/1398197.
- Morejón, Gil. "Zhuangzi's Trees: Insubordinate Joy and Heavenly Becoming." Speech, The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy and The Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy and Science, Fordham University, New York City, October 2013. <https://www.academia.edu/5760519/ZhuangzisTreesInsubordinateJoyandHeavenlyBecoming>.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Sturgeon, Donald. "Zhuāngzǐ - Zhuangzi." Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/>.
- Svarverud, Rune. "The Usefulness of Uselessness: The Realm of Useless Trees According to Zhuangzi." *Studies in Chinese Language and Culture. Festschrift in Honour of Christoph Harbsmeier on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday* (2006): 157-68.
- Van Norden, Bryan W. *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2011.
- Watson, Burton. *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Ying Hu, Shiu. "Ailanthus Altissima." *Arnoldia*, 2nd ser., 39, no. 39 (March 1979): 29-50.
- Zhuangzi. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Translated by Brook Ziporyn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2020.