Aristotle on Necessities and Needs

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Aristotle's account of human needs is valuable because it describes the connections between logical, metaphysical, physical, human and ethical necessities. But Aristotle does not fully draw out the implications of the account of necessity for needs and virtue. The proper Aristotelian conclusion is that, far from being an inferior activity fit only for slaves, meeting needs is the first part of Aristotelian virtue.

1. Aristotle on Necessity

The core concept of necessity, for Aristotle as for us, is of 'that which cannot be otherwise'. This concept plays a useful role in all sorts of different contexts. We say 'it must be' about things we must do in order to achieve our ends, things we must do because something or someone requires it, things that must be the case because something else is the case, things we must believe if we believe the things we already do. We might experiment with metaphysical applications of this idea of what cannot be otherwise, as when we say 'there must be a God', or 'good must triumph over evil', or 'there must be a reason for this'. Once you start to look, necessities are everywhere. Aristotle took this homely notion of necessity for granted. He talks in the *Prior Analytics*, for example, of the way that some things belong to others 'necessarily' (29b29–32a17), and he does not distinguish between 'logical' necessity and 'metaphysical' or 'physical' necessity. For Aristotle, speaking in metaphysical terms, if something is a man, it must be an animal; just so speaking in logical terms, the concept 'animal' belongs to the concept 'man' necessarily. The purpose of logical deduction is then just to 'make the [metaphysical, physical or conceptual] necessity evident' (*Prior Analytics* 24b19).[1] Many

[1] References in this paper are by the Bekker line numbers, and quotations are from the translations gathered in Jonathan Barnes' *Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). There is an argument to be had about whether modern philosophers should really use 'original' Greek texts, but this paper is not the place for

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modern philosophers are squeamish about the concept, and throw the baby of necessity out with the bathwater of teleology, limiting themselves to the *de dicto* necessities of conceptual definitions.[2] But outside the ivory tower, homely talk of necessities continues. In this paper, I will take for granted, as Aristotle did, that the idea of necessity is a useful, even a necessary one.

Aristotle treats the topic in most detail at *Metaphysics* 1015a15-b20. He begins with the primary sense of the necessary, which he gives as 'that which cannot be otherwise'. 'Somehow derivable' from this primary sense are four further senses in which something can be necessary. The first sense is of being required for life or existence. The second is of being required to achieve a good or avoid an evil. The third is of being coerced against will or nature. And the fourth is of being logically compelled, as in demonstration. All four of these senses of necessity are hypothetical, in the sense that they are requirements *if* something is to be: life or existence, good or avoidance of evil, conformity to an external force which might be resisted, conformity to the norms of reason. Aristotle then distinguishes a final sense of necessity which is not hypothetical or dependent, but is 'absolute' or 'independent'. An absolute necessity, he says, must be simple, partless, eternal and unmovable.

The idea of absolute or simple necessity intrigues Aristotle, and is mentioned at several points in the corpus. He identifies two absolute necessities: eternal cyclical motion in *Generation and Corruption*, and God at *Metaphysics* 1015b20 and *XII*, *Nicomachean Ethics X* and *De Anima III*. At *Generation and Corruption II* §11 337b1ff Aristotle discusses eternal cyclical motion. In contingent processes of coming to be and passing away, the earlier stage is required for the later to happen, but it does not make the later stage necessary. Aristotle uses the example of house-building: the foundations are required for the house, but do not make it necessary that the house will come to be. For the later stage to be necessitated by the earlier stage, 'it must be always in its coming to be' (337b35). Only in eternal cyclical motion is this

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it. I have relied on translators. (I could cite Aristotle in support of this approach: translation is the kind of necessity Aristotle thought we should delegate, because it is instrumental, cannot be desired for itself, and is distant from the life-enhancing end of doing the philosophy).

[2] See for example B. van Fraassen, 'The Only Necessity is Verbal Necessity', *Journal of Philosophy* **74** (Feb 1977), 71–85.

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condition satisfied: the later stage is always coming to be in the form of the earlier stage, so that we can say that the earlier stage necessitates the later, and the later stage then necessitates the next 'earlier' stage.

Aristotle's example—disconcerting because we now know that it is not an example of circular motion at all—is the motion of the fixed stars. But he also uses a better example, the eternal cyclical motion of a biological species. As the chicken 'is always in its coming to be', the egg, so the egg is always in its coming to be, the chicken. The stages of a biological cycle necessitate those that follow them. Aristotle also believes that there is a necessarily existing being. The existence of this being depends on nothing else. The absolutely necessary being Aristotle has in mind at 1015a15-b20 is God, described in greater detail in *Metaphysics XII*. God is the unmoved mover that must exist, given that being and movement exist. God is the necessary condition of everything else, complete in itself, perfectly active yet perfectly immobile, self-sufficient and requiring nothing. Aristotle's God is immaterial, and consists of 'thought thinking itself', or the perfect, eternal infinite activity of contemplation. Far from being philosophically arbitrary and religiously motivated, the properties Aristotle attributes to God—life and thought—are necessities of God's functioning, itself necessitated by the world God moves. At 1072b11 Aristotle says that God's necessity is part of God's glory: 'the first mover, then, of necessity exists; and in so far as it is necessary, it is good'.

Any necessity that is not absolute, is hypothetical. Hypothetical necessities are those things which must be if something which might not be, is to be. Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of being or happening: those which are from necessity, those which are for the most part, and those which are by chance (see e.g. *On Interpretation* 19a7–22; *Topics* 112a1; *Physics* 196b10; *Generation and Corruption* 337b10ff; *Metaphysics* 1025a15 and 1064b30ff). The middle category, of things which are for the most part, encompasses things due to nature, custom, habit, reason or choice. Things in the second two categories, those which happen for the most part or by chance, are contingencies. Arguably, contingencies that happen by chance do not have necessities, and cannot be predicted, understood or explained as such. But things in the middle category certainly do have necessities, and can be predicted, understood and explained for the most part and with reasonable accuracy. For Aristotle the phenomena of human life fall into the

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second category, of contingencies which happen for the most part, which have necessities and can be predicted, understood and explained for the most part.

At *Physics II* §9 (199b34ff), Aristotle discusses the necessities of natural or artefactual things coming to be, and argues that they are only hypothetically necessary. An end or, 'the "for the sake of something" is found in events that happen by nature or as the result of thought' (1065a27). The necessities of such things are hypothetical in the sense that: *if* we are to have/there is to be a certain thing (which is contingent), *then* we must have/there must be these things. He says 'the necessary in nature is what we call by the name of matter', and emphasises that things are not strictly caused by their necessary requirements or matter, but rather come about for their ends, which are the true causes.

Aristotle also allows that 'in the definition too there are some parts that stand as matter': if one defines something a certain way, it can be the case that this cannot be unless something else is a certain way, which in turn has a concrete material requirement. His example is sawing. If sawing is defined as a certain kind of dividing, this is only possible with a saw with a certain kind of teeth, which is only possible with iron. Here it looks as though the necessities of anything—object or concept—are what must be presupposed for it to be. So for a house we must first have building materials: although these don't furnish the identity of the house, or cause it, they are necessary in the sense that without them there would be no house. And so also for the concept triangle we must presuppose the number three and the idea of a straight line: although these don't furnish the identity of a triangle, or cause it, there would be no triangle without them.

This common treatment of hypothetical physical necessity and hypothetical conceptual or logical necessity reinforces how for Aristotle, logical and physical necessities work in the same way. Like some modern philosophers Aristotle is 'an essentialist' who believes in '*de re* necessities'.[3] But where for modern essentialists only natural kinds have essences, for Aristotle any concept must have necessary conditions for its application to things, and these conditions are the essence of the thing under its identity as a bearer of that concept. Thus the citizen has an 'essence' or 'necessities' as much as the biological species. To be a citizen is to be a member of

[3] See for example Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) or David Wiggins *Sameness and Substance Renewed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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a state trained to be able both to rule and to obey (*Politics III* §§1–5); if I satisfy those necessary conditions, they are my essence as a citizen, and will be the foundation of some of the things I do by nature, habit, custom, choice or reason, and the full, final and necessitating cause of the things I do just as and for the sake of being a citizen (stand for office, vote, lounge at the common tables, row in the navy, etc.). The distinction between 'natural' kinds and 'social' or even 'essentially contestable' concepts would have struck Aristotle as contrived and unhelpful, I suspect. Each concept or kind is determined by different necessities, some biological, some social, some linguistic or historical. But once the necessities are determined, the way they feature in explaining things coming under the concept is exactly the same.

Aristotle distinguishes the necessities of contingent things from their complete causes, and he also argues that only some of these necessities are properly to be considered parts of the things for which they are necessary. At *Politics VII* §8 he discusses the necessities of the state, and argues that only some of them are proper parts of the state. Just as the builder is necessary for the house, but is not a part of it, so, Aristotle argues, property is necessary for the state, but is not a part of it (1328a30–35). What, then, makes a necessity a proper part? Aristotle seems to believe that a proper part of the whole is one which plays a role in the highest characteristic functioning(s) of the whole, and enables that whole to be self-sufficient. This argument relies on Aristotelian assumptions about the identity of complex, active things: the identity is given by the 'highest' part, so that my identity is given by my mind, rather than by my vegetative or appetitive soul. Aristotle identifies food, arts, arms, revenue, worship, and a power of deciding what is in the public interest and what is just in men's dealings with one another, as the necessities of the state (1328b6–14). These necessities in turn show what functions are required in the state: farming, artisanal crafts, warcraft, trade, priesthood and judicial functions are all needed. Warcraft, political and priestly functions are the necessities that Aristotle judges to be proper parts of the state. Farming, arts and crafts, trade and labour are the necessities that Aristotle judges fail to be proper parts of the state.

Although the necessities of contingent things are not sufficient to cause them, they contribute significantly to their being. Thus, for Aristotle, the necessities of human life contribute significantly to the existence of the state. The state for Aristotle arises naturally out of human existence needs, as follows:

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> The family is the association established by nature for the supply of men's everyday needs. [...] When several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs, the first society to be formed is the village. [...] When several villages are united in a single complete, community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life. (1252b13–30).

For Aristotle, then, the state first arises out of human necessities. But from its origins in human needs, the state naturally develops beyond necessity. It develops to form a framework which is necessary to enable human beings to seek human goods which the provision of necessities cannot bring about, but can only make possible.

2. Aristotle on Human Needs

There is no doubt that Aristotle thought of the needs of contingent beings as necessities. 'That which must be if something is to exist or to live' is the first sense of necessity Aristotle gives at *Metaphysics* 1015a15. The human need for food in order to exist or live is a clear example, and the point is made repeatedly: 'no man can live well, or indeed live at all, unless he is provided with necessaries' (*Politics* 1253b35) and 'the perfect state cannot exist without a due supply of the means of life' (1325b35). There can be no human life unless these needs are met—even the contemplative life, which is the highest, most God-like life for man, and which has fewer and simpler practical requirements than other excellent ways of life, still depends on bodily needs being met: 'for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body must also be healthy and must have food and other attention' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1378b33).

Such necessities for life or existence are arguably less hypothetical or dependent than the second sense of necessity at *Metaphysics* 1015a15-b20, of 'that which must be if some good is to be achieved or evil avoided'. The achieving of a good or avoiding of an evil is a highly contingent matter—one may perfectly rationally choose not to pursue the good this time, or to tolerate the evil. But life and existence are less contingent. I cannot so readily rationally choose not to bother to exist. I might, in some extreme and rare situation,

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judge it would be better if my life ended (I had completed my life's tasks, say, or the future was objectively intolerable, or I owed my life as atonement for some crime). But for any existing thing, even when its existence is a contingent matter, its achievement of good and avoidance of evil will necessarily be less necessary for it, than its existence. The necessities that depend on my existence are thus closer to being absolute than the necessities that depend on my pursuit of a good.[4]

But however close the life or existence needs of human beings may come to being absolute, Aristotle nevertheless holds that most of them are not true parts of the lives for which they are necessities (1328a30–35). 'Farmers [who 'will be of necessity slaves or barbarian country people' (1329a26)], artisans, tradesmen and labourers of all kinds are necessary to the existence of states, but the parts of the state are the warriors and councillors' (1329a35–9). Food, craft and trade are not proper parts of human life. These necessities merely exist for the sake of human life, as 'the art of the builder exists for the sake of the house' (1328a33).[5] Arts, craft and trade are 'ignoble and inimical to excellence'; farming and labour, although morally sound and politically beneficial (1318b12) leave no leisure for politics. Aristotle argues that these mere necessities which are not true parts, should be the task of 'slaves or barbarian country people'. In every state, there must be some 'necessary people', who 'are either slaves who minister to the wants of individuals, or mechanics and labourers who are the servants of the community' (1278a8). Help is at hand, because on Aristotle's view, conveniently, people exist who are ideally suited to these necessary tasks, to whom they can therefore be rationally and justly delegated: natural slaves make good needs-meeters, because they 'have no deliberative faculty at all' (1260a12), and women do also, because although they have a deliberative faculty, 'it is without authority' (1260a13).

Aristotle takes meeting human life-needs to be ignoble, because it is only indispensable, not good in itself and so not choosable for its

[4] One might want to argue further, that existence needs are also closer to being absolute than the other two kinds of necessity mentioned in the *Metaphysics*: the necessity of coercion, or the necessity of following a certain form of reasoning.

[5] There may seem to be two questions here: is needs-meeting a proper part of the life of the individual, or is it a proper part of the state? But for Aristotle, as for Plato, these two questions come together: 'the same life is best for each individual, and for states and for mankind collectively' (1325b31; see also b14–32).

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own sake (1332a9). Spending time meeting such needs is thought to be inimical to excellence, because it encroaches into the leisure essential for virtue. Those involved in meeting needs, like women in the household, farmers and labourers on the land, traders in the marketplace and artisans in the workshop, have no leisure, and leisure is required for political activity (1269a34; 1273a25; 1278a8ff; 1291b27). Meeting these needs also cultivates slavish skills, blunts the skills of virtue, and blurs the distinction between them (1277a33-b7). There are natural slaves, women and barbarian country people who are suited to these functions by nature, but the excellent human being is 'useless for hard work, but useful for political life in the arts both of war and peace' (1254b30).

It is worth considering how Aristotle conceives of the roles of the two kinds of necessary people, women and natural slaves, differently. Both are necessary to free the excellent human beings for higher activities. But where slaves are necessary for the state, women are necessary for the family and the household. A natural slave is a human being who 'participates in reason enough to apprehend, but not to have' (1254b22). To a modern sensibility, Aristotle's claim that some people are natural slaves appears offensively elitist and exploitative. But Aristotle's account of natural slavery may be more intuitive than he is given credit for. It is his treatment of women, rather than slaves, that should worry us.

Women are necessities of the family and the household, which are themselves prior necessities of the state. Woman comes, in Aristotle's quote from Hesiod (1252a12) after the house, but before the ox (the 'poor man's slave') and the plough. For Aristotle, women have a deliberative faculty, but one 'without authority'. By this Aristotle meant what was in his time the plain truth: women were able to make perfectly good practical judgements (since they have a deliberative faculty), but they had absolutely no power to implement those decisions, either by commanding others to do their bidding, or by enacting their judgements through free actions of their own. Aristotle offers no good arguments for why women should be thus subject to male authority. Indeed, when he says women have a deliberative faculty, he implies such subjection will be both irrational and unjust.

Aristotle offers two weak arguments: first, he maintains that women are 'naturally weaker', and 'more fearful' than men, and men should rule them because of this, just as men should rule natural slaves because they lack a deliberative faculty. We can reject this argument because its premises are false. Second, Aristotle maintains women's subjection is necessary. Plato is sometimes

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praised for proposing that in his ideal state women should be educated alongside men for the same roles, including the elite role of Guardian. But this praise fails to notice a sinister aspect of the proposal, which bothered Aristotle. In Plato's state, it was envisaged less that women would be free, than that they would be held in common. Socrates assumes men are better than women at everything ('we need not trouble ourselves with exceptions like cooking and weaving', he says). Aristotle attacks Socrates' proposals, but not because they are insulting to women. Aristotle's worry has to do with what is necessary for human social life to be possible:

> If Socrates makes the women common, and retains private property, the men will see to the fields, but who will see to the house? ... It is absurd to argue from the analogy of animals that men and women should follow the same pursuits, for animals have not to manage a household (1264b1–6)

Aristotle here argues in terms of necessities: human beings must live in families, families must have households, men must work in the fields, so women must see to the house. It could not be otherwise. Aristotle shares Plato's assumption that women do everything less well, but he thinks a partnership between the sexes is necessary for that most fundamental form of human life, a family living in a shared household. Woman's supposed 'weakness' and 'fearfulness' then conveniently suit her to being subjected to leisurely male authority, and to the tasks and virtues of preserving the household. Aristotle's objection to Plato, then, was not that women deserve better than to be held as common sexual and reproductive chattel by men, but that men and the state need women to take care of family homes. This patriarchal worry is still with us: if women go out to work, politic, create and play, who will provide the necessary comforts of home? Aristotle's arguments are weak, because in place of some genuine justification for giving those who attend to public necessities command over those who attend to private ones, Aristotle offers only the sexist myth that women are weak and fearful.

Although he fully acknowledges their necessity, Aristotle despises private and public needs equally. He envisages a state in which women meet needs in the home, and slaves and barbarians meet needs on the land, in the market and in the workshop, while citizens rise above them: 'in a well-ordered state the citizens should have leisure and not have to provide for their daily wants' (1269a34). Distinguished from slaves and paid workers, citizens are

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defined as literally 'free men', men in whose lives necessities do not feature, but are all met by others: 'our definition of the excellence of a citizen will not apply to every citizen, nor to every free man as such, but only to those who are freed from necessary services' (1278a5–14). The function of these citizens—the highest possible function for a human being (see *Nicomachean Ethics X*)—is to enjoy the life of virtue, political activity and contemplation that their leisure, freed of the drudgery of meeting needs, makes possible. The good citizen ought not to learn the crafts of inferiors, because 'if they habitually practise them there will cease to be a distinction between master and slave' (1277a35).

But Aristotle does take some necessities to be proper parts of human life: the necessities of war, politics and religion. Warriors fulfil the necessity of 'maintaining authority both against disobedient subjects and against external assailants' (1328b7). Councillors fulfil the necessity of making political judgement, or 'deciding what is for the public interest, and what is just in men's dealings with one another' (1328b14), and priests fulfil the necessity of organising the honouring of the gods (1329a30). Aristotle offers two arguments for claiming that these necessities are proper parts. The first is that, unlike the other necessities which are 'inimical to excellence', they are apt for the expression of excellence, because they are the highest functionings of human life (recall that the identity or nature of a life is given by the highest thing in it). Because they are among our 'highest' functions, warcraft, politics and religion are apt to embody human excellence. The second is that, unlike the other necessities which are 'ignoble', these necessities are good in themselves and choosable for their own sake:

> [Some things] are good only because we cannot do without them—it would be better that neither individuals nor states should need anything of the sort—but actions which aim at honour and advantage are absolutely the best. The conditional action is only the choice of a lesser evil; whereas these are the foundation and creation of good. A good man may make the best even of poverty and disease, and the other ills of life; but he can only attain happiness under the opposite conditions. [...] This makes men fancy that external goods are the cause of happiness, yet we might as well say that a brilliant performance on the lyre was to be attributed to the instrument and not to the skill of the performer. (1332a12–26)

Aristotle here holds that the activities of the warrior, councillor and priest 'aim at honour and advantage', and 'are the foundation and

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creation of good', whereas the activities of the slave, tradesman, artisan and labourer are simply those we cannot do without, and it would be better if we did not need anything of the sort. Such activities do not involve intrinsic goods. The view Aristotle appears to be urging here, is that a human life in which there was no need for war, political judgement and worship would be an impoverished life; whereas a human life in which there was no need for eating and drinking, or arts and crafts, or trade, or work, would be an enriched and improved one—perhaps because we would have so much more leisure to devote to war, politics and worship.

Aristotle offers reasonably detailed and interesting arguments for his claim that needs and needs-meeting are not proper parts of an excellent human life, whether of the individual or of the state. But was he right? In the following sections I will argue that Aristotle was wrong. Needs are proper parts of human life. Meeting needs is noble, and is expressive of human excellence. Far from encroaching on leisure, needs, as the 'matter' of human life, give leisure a content it could not have without them. Meeting needs involves and cultivates skills which complement other virtues and do not undermine them or blur the distinction between them. And excellent people should meet needs rather than leaving that to other people because that is the only form of self-sufficiency contingent beings like ourselves can coherently aspire to, and because meeting needs is no easier, and so no better suited to inferiors, than any other characteristically human activity.

3. Internal Tensions in Aristotle's View of Needs

In I will argue that the reasons Aristotle gives for holding that the 'grand' necessities of warcraft, politics and religion are proper parts of human life while the 'ordinary' necessities of food-provision, arts and crafts, trade and work are not, are inadequate. Second, I will argue that the Aristotelian virtuous person will, as a matter of necessity, recognise and take themselves to be obliged to meet many human-life needs, not just those of war, poltics and religion.

a. Which Necessities can be Parts of Human Life?

Aristotle distinguishes between necessities that he takes to be true parts of human life (warcraft, political judgement and worship), and necessities that exist merely for the sake of it but are not

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organic parts of it (farming, arts and crafts, trade and labour). As a convenient shorthand, from now on I will refer to the former as 'grand' and the latter as 'ordinary' necessities. Why should we accept Aristotle's view that ordinary necessities are not proper parts of human life? What is it about fighting that makes it apt to express human excellence, where cultivating and supplying food or other essential goods is not? What is it about deciding what is for the public interest, rather than, say, deciding what your child or your mother now most needs, that makes it apt to express excellence? What is it about arbitration in public disputes that makes it noble and excellent, rather than merely indispensable? What is it about worship?

By the criteria Aristotle himself uses to determine whether a human life is a good one, we might question whether a life without the ordinary necessities of food, art and craft, labour, work and trade would be better than a life that contained these things. We can cite examples to show that ordinary necessities can provide plenty of opportunity for the exercise of judgement and the expression of human excellence. A farmer has to judge what to farm, how much, with whose help and when. He has to watch over his crop, tend it, harvest it, and market it. All of these activities can be done well or badly, as part of human life well lived or mindless of their noble role. They can be done in a leisurely way, with thought and for the sake of the good, or they can be done rapidly and carelessly.

It might be objected that Aristotle precisely denies that trade, work, labour, craft, art, food preparation and care-work can be leisurely activities, rather than destroying leisure. His vision of the activities of the 'necessary people' is one of unrelieved, exhausting and mind-numbing toil. But this begs the question. If war, politics and religion can fill leisure without destroying it, why can a reasonable amount of manual labour or care-work not do the same? Having to dig potatoes for eighteen hours a day seven days a week may, indeed, unfit me for thought or happiness. But why should having to dig enough potatoes to feed my community, with the help of every able-bodied member of that community, do so? Might a bit of toil not, in fact, enhance my ability to think and to enjoy life? Aristotle shows an inkling of this possibility in *Politics VII* 15, where he notices how leisure, the supposed highest good and end of all activity, once it is achieved very easily tends to corrupt people, inclining them to hubris, decadent, wanton, outrageous behaviour (1334a11-b5).

Aristotle seems to have mistaken a fact about excessive quantity of any activity for an intrinsic quality specific to activities of a

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particular type. Too much labour, work, care etc. is of course destructive of leisure. But just as we can think, fight, administer justice and worship mindfully and happily, so we can farm, or labour, or nurture, or trade, mindfully and happily, as rational human beings. We can do any of these things in an alienated, reluctant way, with contempt and in a spirit of resentment that it is necessary at all. An Aristotelian outlook is one which makes the concept of life and its characteristic activities irreducible, basic and central. Such an outlook surely obliges us to embrace and accept the natural parts of our life—which is what all these necessities are—and to do them as well as possible, using as fully as possible that rational capacity which is the highest thing in us.

If we can question whether Aristotle is right to claim that ordinary needs-meetings are ignoble, we can also question whether the grand needs-meetings he does favour, of warcraft, politics and worship, themselves rightly should be taken to be proper parts of human life, manifestations of 'leisure' and 'man's higher functions', rather than encroachments. Warcraft is full of opportunities for meaningless and destructive activity, and it gets in the way of the leisurely activities of contemplation and friendship at least as much as farming, or having to obtain, prepare and serve food does. Politics, too, is full of posturing, jockeying for position, ineffectual and poorly focused debate, and it, too, can easily hinder rather than help the activities of contemplation and friendship that human beings most value. The same goes for worship. Anyone who has heard a bit about some fruitless trench warfare, or an interminable court-case or a tedious sermon, will quickly confirm that there is nothing about war, politics or religion as such that makes them immune to the perils Aristotle attributes to 'necessary activities' alone.

It is at least as plausible that the ordinary necessities of nourishment, creation, labour and trade may enhance human life and provide opportunities for excellence, as it is that the grand necessities of war, politics and religion may do so. Even if we think of the good life as Aristotle does, as comprising only the highest activities done as part of leisure, without busy-ness or toil, there is no good Aristotelian reason to think that the activities of farming, arts and crafts, work and trade cannot be proper parts of that life.

b. Does the Virtuous Man meet Needs?

The Aristotelian good man is portrayed as someone who does not meet ordinary needs. But can this be right, given all Aristotle says

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about the good man? Could there be an Aristotelian good man who did not know what human life needs are? Could there be a good man who did not know what to do about such needs? Could there be a good man who did not actually by their own efforts meet such needs, in themselves or in others, when they encountered them? I think not. On the first point, Aristotle implies in the *Politics* that the good man need not know what ordinary necessities are. But if, as Aristotle commonly recognises, ordinary necessities comprise some of the 'matter' of human life, which must be there if human life is to be there, then ordinary necessities are among the elements, the most simple components of human life. It is a further Aristotelian commonplace, that when we want to understand something, we must look first at its simplest parts. To understand the whole, we must understand the elements which comprise it. It follows that if we do not know what the necessities of human life are, we do not know what human life is. The Aristotelian good man of course knows what human life is, and so it follows trivially that he must know what is necessary for that life to be possible and to be maintained in being. It follows from Aristotle's own definitions, that the good man must know what ordinary human needs are.

Must the good man also know how actually to meet ordinary needs? Here again the conceptual structure of Aristotle's view pulls in one direction, while what he says on this topic in the *Politics* pulls in another. What he says, is that the good man does not, and should not think about ordinary needs, because to do so is ignoble and inimical to virtue. But what his view entails, is rather that insofar as the good man is someone able to live an excellent life, he must be able to make the living of an excellent life possible. If you are able to ϕ, you must be able to make ϕ-ing possible: because that is what 'being able to ϕ' means. The good man, then, must be able to meet the needs which are the pre-requisites for the living of an excellent life. He cannot be a good man, if he does not know how to supply the conditions that make his excellent activity possible. So, the good man must indeed know both what ordinary needs are, and know how to meet them. It is worth emphasising that this part of Aristotelian virtue, because it refers to the necessities of human beings as such, rather than those of some particular human being, such as the self, entails that the good man must know and be able to meet the needs of any human being; that is, he must be able to furnish the conditions for excellent human life as such, whoever is to live that life—self or other, individual or community.

Beyond knowing and being able to meet ordinary human needs, must the Aristotelian good man also himself actually meet the

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ordinary human needs he encounters? Might it not be sufficient for virtue, for him just to know how to ensure that someone else meets the needs he encounters: to know, say, how to get a woman to care for his home, a slave to till his fields, a nurse to tend his bodily needs, a samaritan to deal with the hungry beggar he passes on the roadside? Must the good man be someone who actually meets needs, or can he be someone who snaps his fingers to summon a slave whenever a need arises near him? Here, again, what Aristotle says in the *Politics* is not what his own views imply. He says that the good man should use slaves, women and barbarians to meet the ordinary needs that arise around him, and should concentrate on the higher, leisurely functions of war, politics and religion.

But a more consistent Aristotelian position would say that when an ordinary need arises, in normal cases the good man should actually meet it, rather than summoning someone else to do the 'necessary work'. There are two Aristotelian reasons for this. The first one relates to self-sufficiency. To count as a good person, a person must to the fullest reasonably practicable extent be self-sufficiently good. This means that for all the good man's good functions, he must furnish the necessary conditions for those functions—himself. If I rely on others to make my functionings possible or easy, I am dependent on them, and so less self-sufficiently good and a fortiori less good simpliciter. The second reason relates to the sheer importance of ordinary human life needs. Human life literally cannot go on unless the necessaries are furnished. It is not just that some good will be forfeited or evil suffered, nor that some irrationality or force may have been tolerated or perversely resisted, if such ordinary needs are not met. It is that human life itself, this highest thing which matters to the good man unforsakably and for its own sake, cannot continue unless and until the need is met. This makes it requisite and hence rational for the good man to drop anything of any lesser importance that he might be doing, and meet the need. This requirement will hold for the Aristotelian man pretty much whatever else he is doing—planning his next war, haggling over the right poll tax or over whether someone has coveted his neighbours wife, or arranging the sacrifice of a goat to appease the gods or keep the slaves happy. The only exception to this would be in a complex case, where the good man is already engaged in a project that is even more necessary for human life.

It might be objected that where others are able to meet the need, allowing the good man to continue his higher activities without interruption, there is nothing in Aristotle's concept of the good

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man that makes it impermissible for him to delegate the meeting of the need. This is true, but does not establish what Aristotle appears to have wanted: the immunity of the good man to claims of need. That is, it fails to establish that in a case where a need arises which the good man is uniquely (or just best) able to meet, the good man could be immune to the demand. On the contrary, it has been established that the good man must know the need, know how to meet it, and meet it himself.[6]

The conclusion that needs-meeting is the first part of Aristotelian virtue follows straightforwardly from the primacy of needs in human life: unless needs are met, there can be no excellent human life. So we must know what needs are, know how to meet them, and meet them as a matter of priority. This conclusion follows for human life necessities as such—ordinary necessities are no less demanding to the good man than grand ones. The most excellent Aristotelian people will also be most aware of the priority of necessities, and most adept at responding to them. They might do so discreetly, and they might establish social institutions which discharge this obligation on their behalf most effectively. But what they cannot do, is make it the case that they, as human beings seeking human excellence, are not required to satisfy the necessary conditions for excellent human life.

4. Objections to Aristotle's View of Needs

a. Can Activity and Life aim at Leisure?

One of the reasons that Aristotle offers for attributing the low status he does to the activity of meeting many human needs, is that such activity 'destroys leisure'. I have argued above that it is far from clear that working to meet ordinary needs does this, or that working to meet grand necessities does not do it. But there is a deeper problem, with the very the idea of leisure as part of the human good. Aristotle thinks leisure is the first principle of action, and that just as war aims at peace, action aims at leisure (1334a15). Leisure is the 'highest part' of human life, which most clearly expresses human nature, and the best activity is the most leisurely (see e.g. *NE* 1177b4ff; *Pol* 1337b32ff). A leisurely activity is one

[6] Thanks to Christopher Rowe, Sarah Broadie and Thomas Johanssen for pressing the objection that having others meet ordinary needs may be consistent with Aristotelian virtue.

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done for its own sake—it is not required for anything else, and it is not useful. The most perfect leisurely activity for Aristotle is contemplation, because 'nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities, we gain more or less apart from the action' (1777b3).

This elevation of leisure may be what leads Aristotle into error on the subject of ordinary needs. He recognises in *Nicomachean Ethics X* that a life of leisurely contemplation is impossible for human beings, who must also live in the world and among people, and must look after their bodies. In the face of this difficulty, instead of seeking an alternative to this unattainable ideal, Aristotle places contemplation as the unreachable but still orienting and attractive peak of a hierarchy of human activities, saying that we should do everything for the sake of this. But it is irrational to recommend as a goal something that is impossible. Aristotle should have rejected the ideal, and looked critically at the conceptions of activity, leisure and life that generated it. Conceiving of human activity as aiming at leisure is a fatal error, and it is compounded by the conflation of 'activity desirable for its own sake' with 'activity which produces nothing beyond itself'.

There are the resources within Aristotle's work to solve this problem. For Aristotle, life consists of activity—of the characteristic movements of a natural being. Life thus understood 'aims', if it aims at anything, at the fullest realisation of life. Life has no ulterior or higher purpose or exterior for the sake of which it exists as an instrument. This is the strength of Aristotle's distinction between natural living beings, and other objects. Natural living beings have internal ends of their own—their own lives. Other objects may be instruments to other ends, or inextricable functional parts of other wholes—but they have no internal ends. Why, then, does Aristotle conceive of some human activities as instruments for the achievement of leisure, rather than conceiving of all human activities as among the characteristic activities that together non-instrumentally comprise the life of that organism?

I suggest that what we see here is an unresolved tension in Aristotle's thought, between his homely naturalistic conception of life as a complex of activities which are all and equally 'just what we do', and a more metaphysically grand conception of human life as a quasi-instrumental part of a world essentially striving for the perfection of the eternal unchanging circular motion of divine thought (described in most detail in *Metaphysics XII*). The idea that activity is a means for the achievement of leisure is part of the latter, metaphysically grand conception of life as a means for

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achieving perfection. Why Aristotle held onto this conception, in his treatment of human needs, but also in his discussion of the contemplative life, is hard to say. Perhaps the persisting influence of Plato. Perhaps a psychoanalytically motivated yearning for independence and an end to all striving.

It is actually easy to generate a *reductio* of the metaphysically grand conception, I think. If we take the limiting case of the supposedly perfect union of activity and leisure, divine thought, we find that what is here called 'activity' looks nothing like any activity we can even imagine. The difference, phenomenologically as well as metaphysically, between the 'perfect activity' of divine contemplation, and the perfect inactivity of non-existence, seems to vanish. Perfect leisure and perfect activity can only be two different ways of describing the same thing—and they are certainly not ways of describing a form of human life desirable for its own sake. Deprived of the affordances and constraints, the contingencies and dependencies of earthly human life, perfect leisure and activity have no matter on which the form of human action can get to work.

The error of conceiving action and life as aiming at leisure is compounded by Aristotle's identification of the 'desirable for its own sake' and the 'desirable for nothing but its own sake'. I can desire to meet needs for its own sake, although this may be unusual, since meeting needs is an instrumental business. For example I might desire to feed my family for its own sake because I love preparing food and see this as an important and meaningful part of my life. I cannot, of course, desire to feed my family for nothing but its own sake—if I did, this would show I hadn't really understood what a need is all about. But it is far from obvious that the aspect of the activity under which it is 'necessary work' should loom especially large for me. Indeed, one might reasonably think it would be a good idea to play that aspect down, since the more I experience an activity as 'necessitated', the more coerced I will feel, and the more unpleasant the activity will probably be for me as a result. Why did Aristotle think that if I desired the activity for the sake of the needing being, this entailed I could not desire it for its own sake as well? And anyway, can any activity truly be desirable for its own sake alone? Aristotle offers us contemplation of truth—but even that is desirable for the sake of truth, which is something apart from the contemplation. Aristotle seems to be aware of this, when he says every activity 'gains more or less apart from the action', but he fails to draw the conclusion: the metaphysically grand picture of action and life aiming at leisure and perfection must be sacrificed in favour of the homely empirical

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picture of life as the set of things that we do, desirable both in themselves and for what they make possible.

b. Aristotelian Self-Sufficiency Put Right

Aristotle's concept of self-sufficiency bears some responsibility for his denigration of the work of meeting ordinary needs. For Aristotle self-sufficiency is a very good thing—God is self-sufficient; the perfect state is one that it is independent or self-sufficient; the best activities are those that are 'complete in themselves and lacking in nothing'. But only God and eternal cyclical motion are truly self-sufficient; everything else rests on a bed of necessary conditions which might have been otherwise, and might become otherwise. The most self-sufficiency can be for contingently existing beings like us, is an ideal around which we can organise our lives (as when we emulate God, forget our bodies and lose ourselves in thought—for a time), or as a more or less enabling illusion (as when we forget, or bracket, or put out of our thoughts all the contingent conditions that have to be met for this or that to be possible). Whilst to an extent this forgetting of necessities is itself necessary, it carries risks, and I think Aristotle succumbed to them in his thinking about the place of ordinary necessities in human life.

When we think of a concept or a thing, we can't keep the necessities of that thing before our minds. We can't keep the necessities of a measuring rod before our minds, as we measure with it, and we can't keep the individual trees in mind when we think of the forest. But the difficulty of simultaneously seeing what supports something, and taking for granted that it is so supported, does not license us ever to imagine that the supports are absent or unnecessary. The moment we speak of a contingent thing's being 'self-sufficient', we risk forgetting this. The closest to self-sufficiency a contingent being can come, is to have all its needs met. This is what happens when philosophers talk as if a free rational adult man with resources and skills at his disposal is self-sufficient. The man appears to be self-sufficient, because all his needs are met. But cut off his air or water or food supply, deprive him of a limb or a spouse, vision or language or survival skills, and consider just how 'self-sufficient' he will look then. A contingent being can also be relatively self-sufficient when compared to something else. This is what we might mean when we say a plant is self-sufficient: it has fewer or simpler or more easily met needs compared to, say, a

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human being. Or a contingent thing could be self-sufficient only figuratively, or under a particular aspect, as a human contemplator of truth may be 'self-sufficient' and 'God-like'. But so long as a being is contingent, it is dependent on its needs—ordinary or grand—being met.

But for Aristotle dependency is an inferior state. Dependent things are like children, helpless and needy. Better to be independent and self-sufficient. But as I argued above, no contingent thing can really be self-sufficient. What Aristotle should have commended to us as the best state for human beings, then, was neither the needless self-sufficiency of God of *Nicomachean Ethics X*, nor yet the state of the 'free' citizen at leisure whose needs are all met by others of *Politics VII*, but rather the state of a person who self-sufficiently has all their needs met. But notice what this would mean: ordinary needs would not be eliminated, transcended, denigrated or delegated; they would be met—and met by the good person himself, in large part. There is a sense in which to have your needs met is to be self-sufficient, namely, that once your needs are met, the capabilities intrinsic to your nature are available to be actualised. Once, and only once, your needs are met, you can be and act as the thing you are, without any further help—so, 'independently'. But it should be obvious that this sense of 'self-sufficient' is nothing like the self-sufficiency of eternal cyclical motion, or God, which so impresses Aristotle.

Because he thinks self-sufficiency is good and dependency is bad, Aristotle argues that the person who delegates needs-meeting to 'necessary people' can be self-sufficent—but he is mistaken. To be 'self-sufficient', human beings have to be able and ready to meet human needs. An individual or community who cannot meet their needs for food, arts, crafts trade and work without depending on slaves, women and barbarians, is a dependent, vulnerable individual or community, not a self-sufficient one. If they lose control of their 'necessary people'—say the slaves revolt—they will be helpless as children, unable to care or fend for themselves. This is not to say the self-sufficient person cannot choose to arrange society in such a way that others normally do a large portion of the 'necessary work'. It is only to say that to be self-sufficient, they must be ready and able to do it themselves.

Aristotle's picture of the self-sufficient citizen, and the self-sufficient state, then, is confused. He slides from seeing self-sufficiency as a matter of having met, but bracketed, needs, to seeing it as a matter of having no needs, and so recommending the less needsome life of contemplation as a human ideal in the *Ethics*.

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And he slides from seeing self-sufficiency as being able to meet your own needs, to seeing it as being powerful enough to get others to meet them, in the *Politics*. We can accept his analysis of human necessities, without following him into confusion about self-sufficiency.

c. Natural Slaves and Excellent People: The Implications for Needs

Aristotle thought some people are 'natural slaves' while others, because they possess the capacity for rational excellence and leisure, are natural citizens and leaders (1254–60). We modern thinkers find this line of thought alien and repellent. But perhaps Aristotle had a point. Some people by nature do lack a deliberative faculty, and consequently need their lives to be organised by others, and it is perhaps almost forgiveable that Aristotle called those people 'slaves' where we would want a much less offensive term to refer to them, like 'those who give us the opportunity to help them'. Whatever we call them, the fact is that many people are not independently capable of autonomous rational agency. Because of accidents of birth or upbringing, and historical contingencies of the established political order, such people cannot engage effectively in politics, they cannot determine their own activities and relationships, they cannot manage to accumulate the goods they need for an excellent human life. They need help; they need the guidance and support of more capable others.

Aristotle may have made the point in the distasteful idiom of 'inferiority' which requires 'superiors' to take charge—but he was right to recognise the reality, and we moderns are wrong not to do so.[7] People who are not self-sufficient need to be helped by others. Our distaste for dependency notwithstanding, it is no crime, nor a

[7] Our own society, which subscribes to the myth of free rational equal agency, imposes an illusory equality on everyone, and then holds everyone up to the standards of a social game—capitalism—that only highly rational and capable individuals can actually hope to play and win. Adam Smith noted that capitalism depends on some self-deception about just how self-sufficient and independent we can be (see John O'Neill's contribution to this volume, p. *). But Smith did not comment on the concomitant deception necessarily perpetrated by the capitalist state on its less able citizens when it embraces 'free trade'. For trade to be 'free', everyone must be equally self-sufficient, have equal access to the market and equal skill in playing it. The capitalist state flatters its less able citizens as it opens the way for the more able to fleece them, and calls this fair play.

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mark of inferiority, to be needy in this way. But Aristotle was wrong about the implications for needs-meeting of the natural hierarchy of rational abilities across human beings. He claimed that natural slaves are better suited to meeting needs than others. He thought that people who lack the capacity for rational excellence will do best if they are commanded by others who do have rational excellence, and the best thing for these inferiors to do will be to meet the needs of their superiors, so that the superiors will be in a better position to take responsibility for the lives of their slaves.

To a modern liberal, in theory at least, these ideas are abhorrent. We now think that people who lack the capacity for rational excellence should be helped to acquire as much of it as they can, and should be supported in living lives of their own, rather than used as human equipment to enhance the lives of more fortunate others. We think there should be a balance between ordinary needs-meeting, and disputatious, creative, social, political and religious activities in every human life, and we think that a balance between the different areas is desirable and is what good parents, a good education and the good state should foster.

Aristotle's assignment of needs-meeting activities to less rationally capable persons also depends for its plausibility on the underestimation of the importance of ordinary needs that I have described above. Only if you think meeting food needs, or trading, or maintaining a household, say, is actually easy, will you be able to imagine that it is a sensible social arrangement to have less able people do it. We now recognise the complexity and need for skill in previously denigrated ordinary needs-meeting activities, for example those traditionally undertaken by women, like the care of children. We also recognise the complexity and skill involved in making art, in farming, in trading, and the many forms of human labour, including even waste disposal. Whole academic disciplines are dedicated to reinforcing the practical skills and supplying the theory thought necessary to support these supposedly negligible human activities. So Aristotle was wrong, on both moral and rational grounds, to allocate the meeting of ordinary needs to natural slaves. Morally, he was wrong to recommend that less rationally able people should be used as instruments to liberate more fortunate others from ordinary necessities. Rationally speaking, he was wrong to think that the work involved in meeting ordinary needs was either unimportant enough, or easy enough, to make it appropriate work for natural slaves.

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5. Conclusion

Aristotle uses an everyday concept of necessity, and describes the things in the world that fall under the concept. Apart from the absolute necessities of eternal circular movement and God, he sees all contingent things as having hypothetical necessities, which fall short of causing the things for which they are necessary, but are their matter, and may or may not be their proper parts. Human needs are the things that must be if human life is to be—they provide the matter of human life. Aristotle thinks that some of these needs are proper parts of human life—warcraft, political judgement and priesthood—but he denies that needs for food, arts and crafts, trade and work are proper parts of human life, on the grounds that they are ignoble and inimical to virtue, not desirable in themselves, and a human life in which they did not arise would be better than the one in which they do.

Arguing against Aristotle on his own terms, I suggested he had identified the wrong set of human needs as 'proper parts' of human life. The ordinary necessities of nourishing, crafting, trading and working can all be proper parts of the best human life; the grand necessities of warcraft, politics and religion can all fail to be. I suggested that meeting ordinary human needs could be desirable in itself, and rejected Aristotle's suggestion that this could not be so for things that are essentially necessities for ends beyond themselves. I argued that the Aristotelian good man will necessarily be a good needs-meeter. Then, challenging Aristotle's terms, I argued that there are mistakes and biases in his conception of good human life. Leisure cannot be the aim of activity, nor can it be the highest or best state for a human being. Further, self-sufficiency for contingent beings like ourselves cannot consist in having fewer needs, nor in getting others to meet our needs, but can only consist in being ready and able to meet our own needs. Finally, I argued that Aristotle was wrong to think less rationally able people should meet ordinary human needs, both because they should really be helped to achieve good lives of their own, and because meeting ordinary needs is difficult, and not particularly well-suited to the limited skills of less able human beings.

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