

## VIRTUE AND CHOICE IN ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*

In a well known article on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, L.A. Kosman states a plausible account of how Aristotle views the nature of virtue, feeling, and the relation between the two<sup>1</sup>. Virtues, for Aristotle, are dispositions toward feelings (*pathē*) as well actions, and feelings are passively experienced in that they are not chosen. But this account, Kosman thinks, creates a problem for anyone interpreting Aristotle's claims about the relation between virtue and choice (*prohairesis*). If virtues are tendencies toward feelings, and feelings are not chosen, then it's difficult to see how virtues can be prohairesic — that is, to involve choice. Yet Aristotle insists that virtues are prohairesic. The optimal solution to this problem, if there is such a solution, would explain how virtues are prohairesic, but would not challenge the claim that feelings, in Aristotle's view, are not chosen. Kosman considers a solution which seems to suffice, but claims that it ultimately fails. He contends that the problem cannot be solved unless we “rethink” the idea that for Aristotle feelings cannot be chosen. Of course Aristotle never *asserts* that feelings can be chosen, but Kosman thinks that if we interpret Aristotle as holding this, we can easily explain how virtue involves choice. And he thinks Aristotle's account of *prohairesis* makes this solution defensible. This is only a bare outline of Kosman's position, but it will serve as a start. What I intend to show is that the problem Kosman addresses is not as serious as he maintains — in fact, there are two solutions to it suggested by his own article, and neither requires us to “rethink” the idea that for Aristotle, feelings are not chosen. As I will point out in section 3, Kosman's problem should indeed make us rethink something about Aristotle's ethics, but not the thing Kosman has in mind.

### Section 1.

The first task is to fill in the above outline, beginning with Kosman's view of the relation between virtues and feelings in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's ethics, Kosman tells us, is a theory not only of how to act well but of how to feel well. In other words, Aristotle sees virtues as states of character which dispose us not only toward morally appropriate actions but toward morally appropriate feel-

1. L.A. KOSMAN, “Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle's Ethics”, in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Rorty (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980), 103-116. Page references are to this article.





ings (104 ff)<sup>2</sup>. This does not mean, however, that a given virtue is a tendency toward a particular range of feelings *or* a particular set of actions. Rather, feeling and action are twin elements in the realization of any virtue, meaning that every virtue is realized by a characteristic set of actions *and* feelings (104 ff). For example, the courageous man is not simply disposed to act bravely, but to feel fear and confidence in the right amounts and in the right circumstances<sup>3</sup>. Virtues, then, are dispositions toward feelings<sup>4</sup>. But this, Kosman thinks, creates a serious problem. Aristotle states that virtues are prohairetic, yet he also says that feelings are not<sup>5</sup>. Thus, we face the difficulty of explaining how choice can be involved in a disposition toward something that is not chosen (107 f, 110)<sup>6</sup>. In other words, we must explain how these dispositions toward feelings can involve choice, but it seems we cannot look to the feelings themselves for the explanation, since we have said that no choice is involved there. Where and how, then, does choice enter the picture? A possible answer lies in a key feature of Aristotle's ethics, namely the view that each virtue is cultivated through action — that is, through a process of routinely performing the actions characteristic of the virtue in question<sup>7</sup>. Since actions can be chosen<sup>8</sup>, we are furnished with a simple and plausible way of bringing choice into our account of virtue without saying that feelings are chosen. For example, we can say that courage involves choice because it is cultivated through a series of actions that are directly chosen. Once acquired, the courageous state of character will express itself not only in actions, but in a particular range of feelings — feelings which are not chosen, but instead spring directly from the courageous disposition. Hence we can say that the courage thus cultivated involves choice, but the feelings associated with it do not. This solution, Kosman says, is “on the whole correct and, broadly speaking, faithful to Aristotle's vision of the moral life” (113). Kosman's point is correct; in fact the proposed solution is one that Aristotle comes close to stating:

“With regard to the virtues in *general* we have stated... that they are states of character, and that they tend... to the doing of the acts by which they are produced, and that they are in our power and voluntary... But actions and states of character are not voluntary in the same way? for we are masters of our actions from the beginning right to the end... but though we control the beginning of our states

2. See *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*) 1105 b 25 ff, 1104 b 14, 1107 b 17-25, 1106 b 25, 1107 a 5-9.

3. *NE* 1115 a 6 - 1116 a 9.

4. I have omitted the phrase, “according to Aristotle”, and will frequently do so for the sake of brevity.

5. *NE* 1106 a 36, 1105 b 28 - 1106 a 5.

6. Some might be surprised that Kosman considers this a difficulty. This surprise is justified — see the last two paragraphs in section 2, below.

7. *NE* 1103 a 31 ff, b 13 ff.

8. *NE* 1111 a 20-33, 1112 b 31 f, 1113 a 9 ff, 1139 a 31.





of character the gradual progress is not obvious, any more that it is in illnesses; because it was in our power, however, to act in this way or not in this way, therefore the states are voluntary"<sup>9</sup>.

This passage does not mention choice; it speaks of the wider notion of voluntariness. But it says that the acts by which we cultivate virtues are "in our power", that we are "masters" of them. And since Aristotle often says that choice relates to actions within our power<sup>10</sup>, it's reasonable to think the actions mentioned in the quoted passage, those which constitute "the beginning of our states of character", are not only voluntary but chosen. Thus, the proposed solution to Kosman's problem is not merely faithful to the quoted passage; it is strongly suggested by it. But Kosman rejects the solution on the grounds that "it fails in important respects" (113 f). Its failure, he thinks, means that the problem we face cannot be solved without rethinking the claim that feelings, for Aristotle, are not chosen. The fact that virtues are prohairetic, Kosman suggests, can only be explained if we suppose that feelings are prohairetic also (114 f). This, quite obviously, is a drastic solution to our problem (given the implausibility of the claim that we can choose our feelings); thus, before accepting it, we should examine Kosman's criticism of the solution already outlined. This examination, I believe, will reveal that the solution is not a failure. It also will uncover a second solution, one suggested but left unexplored in Kosman's article. This solution is even more plausible than the first, and equally compatible with the view that for Aristotle feelings are not prohairetic.

## Section 2.

The strongest objection to the first solution, Kosman thinks, is that it's at odds with a view Aristotle "seems" to hold, namely that acts chosen prior to and as a means to virtue do not involve choice in a strict sense (113 f). Such acts, Kosman says, may resemble prohairetic acts, but since they are not the realizations of an already established virtue they are not really prohairetic, for "prohairesis involves... not merely deciding but willing, where the notion of will is sufficiently rich to demand reference to the ...habits of an agent's moral life" (114). It follows, contrary to our proposed solution, that virtues cultivated through chosen action do not involve choice, or at least do not involve choice *owing* to the relevant actions, for the actions came prior to the virtues and hence were not chosen in the full sense. Kosman defends all this using a single passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which he reads to mean that virtue is a necessary condition for choosing:

9. NE 1114 b 26 ff. This and all following quotations are from W.D. Ross's translation.

10. NE 1111 b 20-33, 1112 a 30-b 8, 1112 b 31 f, 1113 a 9 ff.





“[C]hoice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state (*ēthikēs hexeōs*)”<sup>11</sup>.

This is a curious passage. As far as I can tell, there are no others like it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* — no others, that is, which include moral character as a requirement for prohairesis. Therein lies the first flaw in Kosman’s objection. The evidence he musters for it, being but one part of a single sentence, is simply too meager to be convincing. This is especially true given that the proposal he is contesting is faithful to most of Aristotle’s text. Now I am not saying that an interpretive claim about a text should always be dismissed whenever there is only one passage supporting it. I do say, however, that given what we know about the origins and composition of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, no isolated sentence in it should be taken as entirely reliable, especially if other passages seem to speak the other way. There is a second flaw in Kosman’s objection. Not only does he furnish only one passage in defense of it, but that passage is open to a reading which renders it incapable of supporting his claims — a reading, that is, which does not imply that moral character is a necessary condition for prohairesis. Let us consider the passage again, this time in context:

“The origin of action —its efficient, not its final cause— is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. This is why choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state; for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character”<sup>12</sup>.

The sentence from which Kosman took his quote begins with “this is why” (*dio*). From this we might expect that the passage immediately preceding it gives reasons for saying that choice requires moral character, yet we find no such reasons. Note, however, that the final part of the sentence begins with “for” (*gar*), indicating, perhaps, that the reasons we seek are contained there. “For good action (*eupraxia*) and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character”. This suggests that the passage quoted by Kosman is mainly concerned with *good* choice, not merely with choice itself — i.e., that when Aristotle maintains that choice requires moral character he means that such character is needed if our choices are to reliably promote *eupraxia*, meaning consistently good actions or well-doing. This interpretation is supported by several other passages in Aristotle’s text, one of which (the first of those below) appears only a few lines prior to the one we have been examining<sup>13</sup>:

“[S]ince moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true *and the desire right, if the choice is to be good...* (emphasis added).

11. NE 1139 a 33. Kosman translates this as “no prohairesis without intelligence and thought, nor without moral character”.

12. NE 1139 a 31-34.

13. NE 1139 a 23 ff, 1105 a 29 ff, 1144 a 17 ff.





[B]ut if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also... must choose the acts, and... his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.

[I]n order to be good... one must do them (the relevant acts) as a result of choice and for the sake of the acts themselves. Now virtue makes the choice right..."

Aristotle obviously thinks that a good moral character is required if choice is to reliably promote good actions or well-doing. He does *not* obviously think that choice itself is impossible without good moral character. In fact, he seems to think that only *deliberation* and *desire* are necessary for choice *per se*. This is revealed in the first of the three passages quoted above, and revealed again only a few lines after the passage cited by Kosman:

"Hence choice is either desiderative reason or ratiocinative desire... The work of both the intellectual parts, then, is truth. Therefore the states that are most strictly those in respect of which each of these parts will reach truth are the virtues of the two parts"<sup>14</sup>.

Observe the reference to the "two parts" of choice, meaning reason and desire. There is no mention of moral character as a third. Choice, then, requires only desire and intellect, but choice which reliably promotes well-doing also requires moral character — such is our reading of the line quoted by Kosman. If this reading is correct, then actions chosen prior to and as a means of cultivating virtues can be said to be *prohairetic*<sup>15</sup>, and of course the virtues thus cultivated can be said to involve choice. It's the latter proposal that Kosman contests, and his objection rests solely on the passage we have just interpreted. So if our interpretation is correct (certainly it is plausible), Kosman is robbed of any evidence for his objection. In sum, the evidence for Kosman's objection is both too meager and too questionable to render the proposed solution (the one in section 1) a failure, particularly since the proposed solution is faithful to the rest of Aristotle's

14. *NE* 1139 b 4-13.

15. It might be objected that if a given set of actions led to the development of various virtues, which in turn led to virtuous conduct, then we can say that the choice to perform the initial actions resulted in well-doing. If so (the objection continues), we must also say that the choice required, and must have issued from, a good character (i.e., from pre-existing virtues), since we have said that choice that promotes well-doing requires such character. This objection is clearly defective. Consider the following: "A shot that hits the bull's-eye requires good aim;" and "Shooting cannot exist without good aiming; for accurate shots, those that hit the bull's-eye, require a sharp aim" (compare with *NE*, 1139 a 33). Interpreted fairly, these statements do not mean that if we find a bull's-eye with a hole in it we must conclude that the shot issued from a good aim. Shooting *per se* requires only pulling a trigger, and a novice might hit the bull's-eye on his first try. To say that hitting the bull's-eye "requires" a good aim means that if our shots are to consistently hit the bull's-eye we need a good aim; it does not mean that if a shot hits the bull's-eye it logically follows that it resulted from a good aim. The same goes for the statement that choices that result in well-doing require, or cannot exist without, good moral character. We can make choices without a virtuous character, and they might promote well-doing. But if they are to *reliably* promote well-doing they must spring from a good moral character.





text. The proposal Kosman contests is a reasonable way of handling the question originally posed, the question of how virtues, for Aristotle, can involve choice although their feeling-realizations are unchosen. But Kosman has two other objections to the proposal in section 1:

“Note in the first place how far we have come from our initial characterization of a virtue as a disposition for deliberate and chosen conduct. That characterization interpreted Aristotle’s description of a virtue as a *hexis prohairetikè* to mean that the virtue was the agent’s ready capacity to act... prohairetically, not that the virtue had been acquired through some mode of prohairetic action. In the second place, the rather elaborate account into which we have been led seems curiously otiose; once we recognize that actions and feelings are linked together as the realizations of a virtue, why not simply say that a virtue is prohairetic because it is a disposition for those elements of its realizations which are actions? For there is no special problem, apart from the general problem of giving an account of what prohairesis is, about actions being prohairetic” (113).

Neither of these contentions rules out the proposed solution. The first says that the solution is removed from Aristotle’s description of virtues as ready capacities to act prohairetically. This amounts to saying that the solution is not *implied* in that description, but this clearly does not make it *inconsistent* with the description. We can agree that virtues are capacities to act prohairetically, and still maintain that virtues formed through prohairetic conduct are, in a derivative way, prohairetic themselves. Kosman’s second claim in the above passage is that the solution in section 1 is needless once we recognize that virtues are realized by actions as well as by feelings, and that actions involve choice. But this really doesn’t amount to an objection. It does not reveal a flaw in the solution it addresses; it merely indicates that an even simpler solution is available. As Kosman puts it in the above passage, “why not simply say that a virtue is prohairetic because it is a disposition for those elements of its realizations which are actions? For there is no special problem about actions being prohairetic”. It is curious that Kosman waits until the concluding pages of his paper to ask this question, for the question naturally comes to mind when one encounters the problem he is addressing. In other words, we are told early in Kosman’s paper that every virtue is realized by a characteristic set of feelings *and* actions, and that actions involve choice. We then are asked how virtues can involve choice if they are dispositions toward feelings which do not involve choice. It’s natural to be surprised by Kosman’s concern over this question, for the solution seems easy: virtues involve choice because they are realized by *actions*, not just by feelings, and actions involve choice. But only late in his paper does Kosman consider this solution, and only then as an objection to the more elaborate solution already proposed. As just indicated, however, it fails as such an objection. It does not fail as an additional *solution*, for it is faithful to Aristotle’s account of virtue, and especially to his description of virtues as tendencies toward prohairetic acts<sup>16</sup>.

16. NE 1106 b 36, 1105 a 31, 1136 a 3 ff.





### Section 3.

We thus end up with not one, but *two* plausible answers to Kosman's original question, which shows that it never really posed a serious problem. Certainly it created no problem requiring us to "rethink" the notion that, for Aristotle, feelings are not chosen. In fact, some might conclude that since the second of the two answers was obvious all along, the question never posed a problem at all; hence the pages spent addressing it —ours as well as Kosman's— were utterly pointless. However, there is one valuable thing our discussion reveals —a small thing perhaps, but something we should occasionally "rethink", or rather remind ourselves of— regarding Aristotle's ethics. The fact that there were two answers to Kosman's question, both faithful to Aristotle's theory but not stated in it, should remind us that Aristotle's concerns were not the same as those of contemporary philosophers, and the puzzles we experience in reading him often result from this difference in concerns. Frequently we approach the work of a past philosopher with a question that seems germane to his subject, only to find several answers consistent with his work yet none explicitly stated in it. This is a clue that although the question is important to us it was not so important to the philosopher, that although he was capable of answering it, he did not find it crucial enough to address directly. The question we have been discussing (the question of how virtue can involve choice) is an example. Although Aristotle leaves passages from which at least two answers can be constructed, he never pauses to address the question in a frank way. This is because his main interest is not the relation between virtue and choice, but the relation between virtue and *legislation*. Unlike contemporary ethical theorists, his main concern is with how men can be made good through appropriate laws, not with the role of individual choice in moral behavior. Thus, many of his ideas on the latter topic are left unclear, but he seldom is unclear on the role of legislation in producing good character<sup>17</sup>. None of this is new to readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, so I will not belabor it. But perhaps we should bring it to mind occasionally, if only to prevent frustration over questions the book does not explicitly address, and to prevent blindness to its provocative answers to many others<sup>18</sup>.

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17. *NE* 1094 a 26-b 10, 1103 b 2 ff, 1179 a 28 - 1180 a 32.

18. I thank Jon Moline for helpful comments on the initial draft of this paper.





ΑΡΕΤΗ ΚΑΙ ΠΡΟΑΙΡΕΣΗ ΣΤΗ ΗΘΙΚΗ ΤΟΥ ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΗ

Περίληψη

Ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης διατείνεται ὅτι οἱ ἀρετὲς εἶναι προαιρετικὲς καὶ ὅτι εἶναι ἕξεις σὲ σχέση πρὸς τὰ συναισθήματα καθὼς καὶ τὶς ἐνέργειες. Φαινομενικὰ θεωρεῖ ἐπίσης ὅτι τὰ συναισθήματα δὲν εἶναι ὑποκείμενα προαιρέσεως. Σύμφωνα μὲ τὸν L.A. Kosman τὸ γεγονὸς αὐτὸ δημιουργεῖ πρόβλημα γιὰ τὴν κατανόηση τῆς ἀριστοτελικῆς ἀπόψεως ἀναφορικὰ μὲ τὴ σχέση ἀρετῆς καὶ προαιρέσεως, ἓνα πρόβλημα ποὺ ὀφείλει νὰ μᾶς ἐπιβάλλει νὰ ξανασκεφθοῦμε καταπόσο ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης θεωρεῖ τὰ συναισθήματα ὡς μὴ ὑποκείμενα σὲ προαίρεση. Στὴ μελέτη αὐτὴ ὑποστηρίζω ὅτι τὸ πρόβλημα ποὺ θέτει ὁ Kosman δὲν εἶναι στὴν πραγματικότητα τόσο σοβαρὸ ὅσο διατείνεται ὁ ἴδιος. Ὑπάρχουν δύο δυνατὲς λύσεις τὶς ὁποῖες ἐκθέτω στὸ ἄρθρο μου καὶ ἐπομένως δὲν εἶναι ἀναγκαῖο νὰ θεωροῦμε ὅτι κατὰ τὸν Ἀριστοτέλη τὰ συναισθήματα δὲν ὑπόκεινται σὲ ἐλεύθερη βούληση.

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