Recapitulation of the relationship of some of our various terminology from Tuesday: action; virtue; character; happiness; reason

All animal movement springs from desire. Animal movement is desire in action. (He talks about this in a part of book III of DeAnima that we don’t have—433a9-30). When A is talking about the human soul as the source of motion/action, he distinguishes appetite and practical reason. Practical reason is reason in the service of action; and in this sense it is itself a motivator, a source of motion. The agent wishes for an object; and his awareness that he wishes for a certain end is a manifestation of that wish, which motivates the agent to deliberate how to get it.

“Wish” (which he talks about in Chapter 4 of Book III) is the initiator of deliberative process. He pretty much uses the term ‘wish’ in our text to distinguish rational desire from appetite; animals, he claims, have appetite but don’t in the same way as men have the capacity to do or refrain; they are more driven by their passions, less able to act OR refrain with respect to their desires, than men are. Wishes are desires shaped, organized and impregnated with reason (unlike appetite, which is a bare force.).

“Deliberation”: Lear talks about deliberation (chapter 3 of Book III) as an expression of desire; it is motivated by a wish, it is a transmitter of desire, and its conclusion is either a deliberated choice or an action immediately motivated by the deliberation. “Deliberation brings our desires back to us in a form in which we can act to satisfy them.” Deliberation starts with the desired goal, and leads as it were backwards to the agent in steps that will if initiated lead him to the goal. When you figure out what it is that you have to do first to get what you want, you initiate that chain by beginning to act to get what you want.

The organization of desire which enables man to live a truly happy life Aristotle calls virtue, excellence: virtues are states of the soul which allow a man to live an excellent life, to fulfill his function to the fullest extent. The virtues are stable states of the soul which enable a person to make the right decision about how to act in given circumstances, and which also motivate him to so act. It is these stable states of the soul that we think of as constituting a person’s character.

If a man can organize his desires so as to desire to live a distinctively human life, then he will be motivated to live a distinctively human life; and that life will satisfy his organized desires; and so he will be a happy man. The happy life is one in which man deeply fulfills his nature. And this realization of man’s nature is the virtuous life. Happiness is not an external goal: it is internal to the nature of man.

Book III of the NE is all about moral psychology. This book presupposes that we are responsible for our actions; that we intend them, and can be praised or blamed for them. Chapter 1 talks about the exceptions to this presupposition; if intention is absent, praise and blame are irrelevant. The next 3 chapters discuss various elements in the planning and choice of actions, and in the relation of that planning and choice to the envisaged result of action.

Chapter 5 puts responsibility front and center, and Urmson suggests that this is the place where A most explicitly discusses free will. If we have the power to act, we also have the power to refrain from action. Our actions are a product of our deliberation about our desires and our choices on the basis of them. “If such action or inaction constitutes being good men or evil, it depends upon us whether we are decent or worthless individuals.” (1113b15) Actions in which the initiative lies in ourselves are in our power and are voluntary actions—for which we are culpable, for which we can be held responsible.

Punishment for wrongdoing clearly presupposes such culpability. Why would we punish people unless we thought that thereby we were able to change their behavior? We have in law and in everyday judgment circumstances which we are willing to take into consideration to reduce responsibility—coercion and ignorance, as mentioned earlier: But even there we distinguish between cases where the agent could have known, and cases where he really couldn’t; and we hold people responsible for ignorance of things they could have known if they had bothered to do so. And: bad character is no excuse for bad behavior, because on every occasion when we stand before a choice of actions, we are free to choose against our habitual patterns. “We are in control of our actions from beginning to end.” (1115a) And insofar as the decision to behave or not to behave in a given way is ours in the first place, we are equally responsible for our character.
Book VI of the NE continues the exploration of moral psychology. We have talked about the involvement of reason in deliberation in Book III; and in Book VI A explores further how it is that reason can be involved in deliberation, and what kind of reasoning is involved.

Between Book III and Book VI are several books which spell out in terms of his definition of virtue as seeking the mean, what the results are of imposing this form upon the material of the various passions. He begins with courage in Chapter 6 of Book III (=a mean with regard to things that inspire fear and confidence). In chapter 10 he similarly analyses temperance (=a mean with regard to pleasures; the vice of excess is self-indulgence, and he doesn’t even give a name to the vice of deficiency, saying that “People who fall short with regard to pleasures and delight in them less than they should are hardly found; for such insensibility is hardly human.”

Book IV addresses liberality (=the giving and taking of wealth, with meanness and prodigality the vices), magnificence (for which there are few modern equivalents) and pride; and various things like ambition, pride, shame, wit… Book V is devoted to justice as a trait of character, and is pretty interesting, but is not in our text. The example of one analysis of a virtue that is in our book is from Book IV, and I leave it to you to figure out from that example how he actually applies his definition of virtue to the relevant passion to arrive at the mean.

Book VI: Intellectual virtues

We return to moral psychology in Book VI. As I’m sure you all remember, he said early on that there were both moral virtues (virtues of action) and intellectual virtues; and this book adds to Aristotle’s account of excellence of character an account of intellectual excellences, of two kinds: theoretical reason, and practical reason. (We might think of ‘intellectual virtues’ as things like candor, impartiality or self criticism—but that’s not what A had in mind. Instead think of these as excellences of intelligence—two different ways of thinking, each of which can be perfected, but which have different objects and different roles in the life of man.)

After all, he tells us in chapter 2: moral virtue involves choice; choice is a deliberate desire; so if the choice is to be good, the deliberation must be good: that is, the reasoning must be ‘true’ and the desire correct. (1139a23)

There are two types of excellence of intelligence: begins to examine them in chapter 3.

Theoretical reason: Concerned with explanation and prediction. Aristotle speaks of this as a concern with ‘truth for its own sake.’ Matters of fact and their explanation—trying to understand why things are as they are, and trying to predict on the basis of our understanding of nature and its patterns what might happen in the future… Aristotle talks about it here as a deductive system: we grasp certain truths immediately—the sort of thing we would consider logical truths, for instance: that a proposition and its contrary cannot both be true in the same way at the same time; or definitional things: if what I mean by bachelor is unmarried man, and jones is an unmarried man, he is a bachelor…

[Doesn’t take much account here of empirical sciences, does he?]

Practical reason: is reason in the service of action, and is responsible for both production and deliberation.

(a) Production has an end other than itself, which is why he includes art or applied science in this chapter. Art he defines as ‘producing under the guidance of …reason.” [Does it aim at ‘truth’ in some sense?]

(b) Deliberation asks of a set of alternatives for action, none of which have been performed yet, which is the better? What ought one to do? Which course of action is better? It is about the desirability or value of actions.

Deliberation about possible courses of action generates appropriate intentions in so far as the person is rational.

Desire—wish or appetite—is for some end. To achieve that end, we have to choose some course of action that is within our power. So reason and desire are inseparable aspects of choice. [Sometimes he calls ‘wish’ ‘rational wish.’]

What are the subordinate excellences of intelligence which constitute practical wisdom?

1. Deliberation: a capacity to plan ones life well.
   a. Of course you can’t plan about what is out of your control
   b. To be wise is an excellence
A bad man probably can’t possess wisdom
Wise planning and deliberation must conduce to the desired end, and the end must be
good; it must conduce to eudaimonia.

(2) understanding: capacity to sum up the situation and know how to act appropriately while
engaged in action; a planning skill
(3) judgment, the ability having summed it up to know what is right and proper
(4) cleverness: the ability, once a plan has been made, to put it into action. This is more a skill of
execution of plans than a skill of making plans.

Relation between excellence of character and wisdom:
Practical wisdom, he sometimes says, is concerned with the means to our ends. But practical
wisdom engages a lot more than just means-ends relations.
Excellent character has to be guided by experience combined with deliberative and executive skills, and it
must be aided by a capacity to judge how to act properly in various situations, a capacity which has to be
developed in a good education.

In chapters 12 and 13: A raises questions about the value of both theoretical and
practical wisdom. Theoretical wisdom is concerned only with the unchanging world of necessity (and is
thus no use in the world of change)—but it is a necessary component of eudaimonia: “it is a part of total
excellence, and its possession makes a person eudaimon” (1144a3-6)—but also, apart from being an
excellence and therefore of value in itself, what makes a character excellent and an excellence is that the
agent does not merely do what is proper, but does it because it is proper. Intention matters; without
understanding, intention is imperfect.

Book VII
Starts by listing states of character: heroic or godlike excellence
Human excellence
Strength of will
Weakness of will
Badness of character
Beastliness.

This book considers strength and weakness of will: continence and incontinence, self-control and lack of
self-control.

Chapter 2: Problems in the current beliefs about moral strength and moral weakness
A pretty obvious premise in both Aristotle and Plato is the contention that men aim at, always
desire above all things, their own well-being. We’ve seen it in the dialogues—the Apology, Book I of the
Republic—a repeated assertion that noone but a fool would consciously set up a situation that he knew was
going to result in harm to himself. In the Apology, Socrates made part of his self-defense that little
discussion:
“Really, Meletus! Have I reached such a height of stupidity as not even to realize
if make one of my neighbors a worse man, I’m likely to come to some harm at his hands? On this
point I don’t believe you, Meletus, nor does anyone else.” (25e)

In Book I of the Republic, in his little exchange with Thrasymachus, Socrates (339-340) points out that the
stronger sometimes mistake their own interests and command that their subjects do things which turn out
not to be in their best interests at all; this is a failure of knowledge. In the Protagoras, a dialogue we didn’t
read, this becomes even more clear:
I am pretty sure that none of the wise men thinks that any human being willingly
makes a mistake or willingly does anything wrong or bad. They know very well
that anyone who does anything wrong or bad does so involuntarily. (345e; see also 358 d ff.)

This is taken to be the claim that akrasia—incontinence—knowing the good and nonetheless acting against
one’s knowledge—is impossible. Such behavior results from ignorance (amatheia), according to Plato.
This remains an enduring philosophical problem, by the way. An interesting article in the
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy discusses the contemporary views of Richard Hare, Donald Davidson,
Michael Bratman; akrasia remains a live issue in philosophy of action.
And it remains a huge problem in Aristotle interpretation, too.

Aristotle invokes this Socratic claim here, and claims that “this is plainly at variance with observed facts.”
He has to reconcile two apparently inconsistent statements:

(1) Men always aim at what they know to be in their best interest.

(2) Men often act in a way they know to be contrary to their best interest.

As often happens in philosophical discussions, our author resolves a contradiction by making a distinction. This first approach to resolving the problem of akrasia is found in 1146b25-35. Aristotle says that “a man is said to know both when he does not USE the knowledge he has, and when he does use it.” Just as I can be said to know greek even if I am not actively conjugating a verb, so I can be said to know that something is not in my best interest—but not draw upon, not activate, that knowledge.

I can be kept from access to the relevant knowledge, he suggests at 1147a10ff, when “asleep, mad or drunk;” and strong passions can have the same effect on a man.

The second approach to resolving the problem of akrasia draws on the famous (but weird) notion of the practical syllogism. I’m sure you all know what a regular syllogism is, and we’ve invoked the canonical syllogism several times in this class:

A syllogism typically has as a major premise a universal statement (a): all men are mortal; and as its minor premise a particular statement: (b) Socrates is a man. The conclusion, which can be validly deduced from the conjunction of the two, is (c) that Socrates is moral.

The practical syllogism is similar, but from it one deduces not a logical truth, but a recommendation to action. So I may know that in general an action of a certain sort is an appropriate action; but I may not realize that the action I am contemplating is an action of that sort. Or: (and I think that this is how to interpret alternative d) I may have competing syllogisms. His example is something like this: I know that eating sweet things is bad for my health, and that this is a sweet thing. But I also know that everything sweet is pleasant, and that is also a universal premise. If I am in the mood for a little something, I may conjoin the minor premise with the wrong universal premise—and thus deduce the wrong conclusion—the one that says “eat this [because it is pleasant]” instead of the conclusion that says “don’t eat this [because it is bad for your health].”

I said that this is an enduring philosophical problem; and it seems to be so because of the following conception that we generally hold about ourselves as agents in the world (which is a conception that it seems to me Aristotle holds as well, one that he spends a lot of time and effort, here and elsewhere, trying to develop:

Jonathan Lear has the following to say on incontinence:

Beliefs, desires, values and actions are intimately interrelated. We can see a person as an agent, acting intentionally, only insofar as we can see his behavior within the scheme of beliefs and desires that we attribute to him. To see any action as intentional we must construct a rather complex teleological conception of an agent, with a mutually conditioned web of beliefs and desires, acting purposefully in an environment which he more or less understands. And lying at the heart of the concept of intentional action is the presumption of rationality; an explanation of an intentional action must be part of a story which portrays the agent as a rational animal. Incontinence—in the strictest sense—threatens this structure, and that’s why it’s philosophically interesting.

[I think that this is in fact the picture of intentional action that Aristotle is developing in the NE.]

The problem of incontinence is acting against one’s considered judgment. Lear suggests that it is possible, and explicable, when one’s judgment is a sincerely held false conscious belief—about oneself. I may truly believe that in these circumstances this is the right thing to do. But I may be mistaken in thinking that this is what I want to do, and that this is what I will do. Incontinence, Lear suggests, is a failure of self consciousness.