INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the very broad notion of moral evil in the Aristotelian ethical treatises. This inquiry is rendered problematic, however, by the fact that in the opening of *Nicomachean Ethics*, the notion of evil is, *de jure*, removed by the statement that everything aims to the good. Analogously, in other passages of the ethical treatises, the Stagirite reminds us that human beings are naturally inclined to the Good, and that this is seen in the natural virtues.

A second issue concerns the interpretative *koinē* on this topic, inclined, on the one hand, to affirm the Philosopher’s limited interest in the topics of evil and the negative, and, on the other hand, to describe Aristotelian ethics as “pacified ethics,” or rather as a “non-conflictual” morality, in which the agent does not experience turmoil and interior “disorders.”

Notwithstanding these two problems, it can be shown that *de facto* the theme of moral evil is extremely pervasive and absolutely relevant, both historically and conceptually. Moreover, evil, described by Aristotle as disorder and lack of measure, plays a crucial role on several levels: on the level of the soul, on the level of the moral subject, and on that of human life, which strives for a harmonious, measured, and happy existence, but is forced in daily life to face innumerable disharmonizing elements.

In fact, despite its apparent exclusion from ethical inquiry, moral evil receives particular attention precisely in this specific field and presents a series of very interesting repercussions in psychological, anthropological, epistemological, and political-juridical debates, which, in...
this article, can only be mentioned en passant, beyond the field of ethics stricto sensu. Thus this work seeks to examine the multifaceted notion of evil, analyzing the words used by Aristotle in the ethical treatises to name it, and then noting how these words are linked to each other and probing their semantic specificities.

The second step of the inquiry consists in the attempt to work out the conceptual distinction between the two fundamental sides of evil that emerge from the Aristotelian opus: in a certain sense, evil can be “suffered,” and in another sense, it can be “acted” or “caused.”

Within this multiplicity of semantic levels, furthermore, we can find other fundamental articulations of the question that demand the research be expanded to include identification and comparison of two very crucial figures of evil: the notion of vice (kakia) and that of lack of self-control or incontinence (akrasia). In addition, our inquiry should include the study of the links between the notion of vice and the very complex and amply studied one of ignorance (agnoia).

GRAMMAR OF EVIL

To observe the words used by Aristotle to designate the notion of evil and to note their use in his Ethics and, more in general, in his corpus, it is necessary to have recourse to the lexicon, focusing, in particular, on three fundamental lemmata: kakos, phaulotēs, and mochthēria. Besides these lemmata, it is also fruitful to consider other fundamental expressions used by Aristotle to speak of evil, more or less technical nouns and adjectives that have a very rich background. Using these expressions, Aristotle seems not to indicate a particular kind of evil, but the moral evil qua talis. In other words, human beings can be bad in many ways, as we read in NE II.6, 1106b35: “good men in one way, but bad in many” (ἕσθλοι μὲν γὰρ ἄσθλοις, παντοκακοὶ δὲ κακοὶ). However, it seems that when Aristotle uses one of these terms, and the respective adjectives, he refers to the notion of evil without qualification.

In this sense it can be said that human beings who are kakoi, phauloi, or mochthēroi can be considered generically bad or evil and that, as has been rightly observed, these words (to which can be added ponēria as well), must be considered synonymous. Kakia, phaulotēs, and mochthēria, in fact, represent the opposite pole to the good (agathon): in the Aristotelian lexicon, as in the Greek language there is a dynamic of references and oppositions between the sphere dominated by agathos and “the negative determinations that coagulate themselves . . . in phaulos.”

This polarity also concerns things, given that wickedness, or nastiness (meant here as inadequacy) can also concern inanimate entities. There are excellent persons or houses that function at their best and achieve their task, their specific function (i.e. their ergon), and there are evil persons and things, inadequate to their function, that is, “un-functioning,” “unsuccessful.” But within this polarity that crosses without distinction both the animate and inanimate universe, some important differentiations can be found.

There are many ways to be wrong, and each of these ways represents a kind of evil, as confirmed, for instance, by the wide range of evil passions and actions, linked, in NE II.6, 1107a9–13, to the general notion of phaulotēs:

Not every action or emotion however admits the observance of a due mean.
Indeed the very names of some directly imply evil (phaulotētos), for instance malice (epibairekakia), shamelessness (anaischuntia), envy (phthonos) and, of actions, adultery (moicheia), theft (klopē), murder (androphonia).25

And, as there are many ways to be phauloi, there are also many ways to be kakoi, vicious. Every vice, as excess or defect in comparison with the right measure (i.e. with the good), is an evil, but there are many ways to realize vice, many ways to be excessive or defective. It is no accident that Aristotle attributes different names to the modalities of realization and externalization of evil:26

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>excess</th>
<th>defect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irascibility (O’ργιλότης)</td>
<td>Spiritlessness (αναληψία)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rashness (θρασυ’της)</td>
<td>Cowardice (δειλία)</td>
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<td>Shamelessness (άναισχυντία)</td>
<td>Diffidence (κατάληψία)</td>
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<td>Profligacy (άκολοχοια)</td>
<td>Insensitiveness (ἀναισθησία)</td>
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<td>Envy (φθόνος)</td>
<td>(nameless) (μικροψυχία)</td>
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<td>Profit (κέρδος)</td>
<td>Loss (ζημία)</td>
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<td>Prodigality (ἀσωτία)</td>
<td>Meanness (ἀνελευθερία)</td>
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<td>Boastfulness (άλαζονεία)</td>
<td>Self-deprecation (εὐθεία)</td>
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<td>Flattery (κολακεία)</td>
<td>Surliness (ἄπερχεσθαι)</td>
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<td>Subservience (ἀρέσκεια)</td>
<td>Stubbornness (αὐθάδεια)</td>
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<td>Luxury (πανουργία)</td>
<td>Endurance (κακοπάθεια)</td>
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<td>Vanity (χαυνότης)</td>
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<td>Extravagance (δαπανηρία)</td>
<td>Shabbiness (μικροπρέπεια)</td>
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<td>Rascality (πανουργία)</td>
<td>Simplicity (εὐθεία)</td>
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However, this chapter does not focus on these specific forms of moral evil, but on the notion of moral evil before its specification. It can be seen that this notion is intrinsically polymorphic, and that evil can be spoken of in many ways not only because many forms of evil exist27 but also because moral evil itself is, for Aristotle, a πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον.

**EVIL “SUFFERED”**

Evil destroys and does not build; it rips and it does not mend; it cuts and it does not bind. It strives always and everywhere to annihilate, to turn to nothing.28

As indicated in the introduction, the first fundamental distinction in the notion of evil is that between “evil suffered” and “evil acted.”

Evil “suffered” can be understood as the evil a human being happens to suffer involuntarily and unexpectedly (paralogōs), something a person happens to experience independently of his will29 and, therefore, of his responsibility. It is a kind of evil that, as we read in Rhetoric II.7, 1386a5–15,30 moves us to pity:

They are all painful and distressing things that are also destructive, and all that are ruinous; and all evils of which fortune is the cause, if they are great. Things distressing and destructive are various kinds of death, personal ill-treatment and injuries, old age, disease, and lack of food. The evils for which fortune is responsible are lack of friends, or few friends (wherefore it is pitiable to be torn away from friends and intimates), ugliness, weakness, mutilation; if some
misfortune comes to pass from a quarter whence one might have reasonably expected something good; and if this happens often; and if good fortune does not come until a man has already suffered.

The wide and extremely varied gradations of “evils that happen” all share the fact that the person who suffers them is not responsible for their occurrence. This is an evil that, *stricto sensu*, lies outside the ethical field and concerns, instead, the physical or biological one.

Certainly, in some specific cases, as Aristotle points out, one puts oneself in the conditions of suffering evil (e.g. when one becomes sick because he has not sufficiently taken care of himself⁴¹), but in general, “evil that happens,” like pain, suffering, and death, can be counted among those “guiltless” evils that in German are expressed as *Übel*, distinguishing them from the various ramifications of “acted evil,” of “bad evil,” namely of *Böse*.⁴² Among the forms of “suffered evil” we can find death, pain (which Aristotle defines as “disintegration.”⁴³ an evil to avoid⁴⁴), and the passions that Aristotle deems neither good nor evil⁴⁵ in and of themselves; they are something that human beings cannot help but suffer, as the term *pathos* itself says. It would be like trying to persuade someone not to feel warmth, pain, or hunger.⁴⁶ The individual happens to suffer these evils; people are in a certain way possessed by them,⁴⁷ and cannot avoid them. In fact, Aristotle reminds us in *Eudemian Ethics* VII.2, 1238a16–17, that such evils are by nature under the influence of fortune and misfortune.⁴⁸

Whether these human evils are the product of an opposing *tuchē* or of an inescapable Ate sent by the superior powers, according to the ancient Greek religious conception, or whether they are sent by God himself, according to the hypothesis offered in MM II.8,⁴⁹ in any case, they lie beyond the horizon of *praxis* and, therefore, outside the sphere of the human being’s responsibility.⁵⁰ However, in the Aristotelian view, seeing that the human being is not responsible for the occurrence of a certain kind of evil does not mean that the person is completely exempt from all responsibility.

On the contrary, asserts the Stagirite, it is precisely in the face of the greatest evils that the human being is called upon to show his caliber. This does not mean being courageous regardless of the cost, or not fearing the evils at all. In fact, it would be absurd not to fear some evils,⁵¹ given that they are terrifying for anyone who has the use of reason. These evils exceed the capacity of human endurance⁵² and are so awful that, faced with them, it is better to die or not ever to have been born:

For many of life’s events are such that they cause men to throw life away, for instance, diseases, excessive pains, storms; so that it is clear that on account of these things any way it would actually be preferable, if someone offered us the choice, not to be born at all.⁵³

There is no doubt that, faced with the devastating chances of life, not even the wise person is able to stand. In fact, the *phronimos*, the person able to build a good life and to provide it with stability, to base it on solid foundations, is certainly capable of handling little misadventures⁴⁴ and of harmonizing them within a happy existence,⁵⁵ but he is not able to be happy when faced with devastating misadventures. In the face of terrible evils, Aristotle teaches, wisdom itself is helpless:
The happy man can never become miserable; though it is true he will not be supremely blessed if he encounters the misfortunes of a Priam. Nor yet will he be variable and liable to change; for he will not be dislodged from his happiness easily, nor by ordinary misfortunes, but only by severe and frequent disaster, nor will he recover from such disaster and become happy again quickly.\textsuperscript{46}

Thus, among the various forms of suffering, understood as evil that occurs, we find both pain (problematically defined by Aristotle as passion and what follows it\textsuperscript{47}) and passion,\textsuperscript{48} the nature of which is intrinsically polymorphic and shifting.\textsuperscript{49}

While (1) passion, \textit{in itself}, is neither good nor bad but is something that unavoidably occurs, it is also true that Aristotle asserts that there are both (2) intrinsically good\textsuperscript{50} passions and (3) intrinsically bad ones.

Thus:

(1) In the first case, the person in whom such passions occur cannot be considered culpable for them or responsible for experiencing them, given that, as we read in NE II.5, 1105b31–2, “nor are we either praised or blamed for our emotions.”

(2) The second case regards passions explicitly defined as “praiseworthy” (see EE III.7, 1234a24–7: “None of these middle states, though praiseworthy, are virtues, nor are the opposite states vices, for they do not involve purposive choice … each of them is an emotion”).

(3) The third and most interesting case deals with absolutely blameworthy and inherently malicious passions. An emblematic passage is found in Nicomachean Ethics II, which offers a list of irreparably malicious passions, by which one \textit{always goes wrong}:

Not every action or emotion however admits the observance of a due mean. Indeed the very names of some directly imply evil, for instance malice, shamelessness, envy . . . All these and similar actions and feelings are blamed as being \textit{bad in themselves}; it is not the excess or deficiency of them we blame. It is impossible therefore ever to go right in regard to them; one must \textit{always be wrong} (\textit{ἀεὶ ἀμαρτάνειν}).\textsuperscript{51}

**EVIL “ACtED”**

While, as we have briefly outlined, the first form of evil, “suffered evil,” is almost completely excluded from the horizon of responsibility, of what is up to us and then, more in general, from the moral horizon \textit{stricto sensu}, the second form, the “evil we do” presents a very different picture.

The Aristotelian texts identify subtle but fundamental distinctions between various kinds of “acted evil.” Each of these elements will be reviewed briefly below.

**VICE**\textsuperscript{52}

**Vice as Chronic Disease**

A first and fundamental form of “acted evil” is vice. Aristotle compares a person marked by vice, in particular the vice of intemperance, to a consumptive. Consumption, unlike more or less short-lived or episodic evils, is a durable disease and thus all the more serious.

The psychological state of the wicked person is worsened by the fact he does not even know he is “ill,” that is, in the wrong:

All wicked men are ignorant of what they ought to do and refrain from doing,
and this error is the cause of injustice and of vice in general. . . . The ignorance (agnostic) that makes an act blameworthy is not ignorance displayed in moral choice (that sort of ignorance constitutes vice). 53

The complex theme of ignorance will be addressed below.

It should be noted that the ignorance that characterizes the wicked person, far from rendering the action involuntary and void of responsibility, is precisely the constitutive emblem of the vice itself. The person marked by vice, in fact, acts not only completely voluntarily, 54 without compulsion, 55 but also by means of choice: in fact, he or she

does what is evil, and his rational Principle consents thereto, and he believes that he ought to do what he does, the guide within him is diseased. 56

The wicked person knowingly chooses to behave in a certain manner (the wrong one), but since he does not know that 57 he is wrong, does it without regrets and without contrition; in fact, Aristotle notes, he “does not feel remorse (μεταμελητικός), for he abides by his choice (ἐμμένει . . . τῇ προαιρέσει).” 58

The wicked, therefore, does not experience internal conflict, the quarrel between reason and desire, 59 given that in him reason and desire travel in the same direction: the wrong one. The wicked person, in fact, sees badly, since what is evil seems good to him. So though he does not want evil, 60 he is directed to it. Aristotle explains:

The thing desired and wished is either the good or the apparent good (ἵ το ἐγευμένον ἀγαθόν). 61

The good that the wicked person thinks he aspires to is only an apparent good, but he does not know that, because his habitus, his capacity to “see” an end rightly has been corrupted by wrong choices, by giving in to desire and passions, all factors that irreversibly distort the ends. 62 Expressed in other terms, in the course of doing wrong actions, perhaps initially obtorto collo, or simply by imitating other people’s behavior, one comes not to recognize the wickedness of that action. Completely unaware of the possibility of another reason, 63 the person marked by vice chooses in an incorrect way and acts badly, like an archer aiming for the wrong target. The fact that the archer aims for the wrong target depends, precisely, on the fact that his reason is ill and disposed incorrectly (kakós). 64 The wicked person, therefore, does not zero in on the right target because he sees and will always see evil: the rooting of the wrong habitus, the permanent acquisition of a wrong perception of reality, prevents him from taking other views and, by means of desire, aiming, for other targets.

INCONTINENCE 65

Incontinence as an Episodic Disease

The wicked person, therefore, is ill, and his/her disease is chronic, like consumption or dropsy. 66 The incontinent, on the contrary, who knows that what he is on the point of doing (or even what he is doing) is wrong, and yet does it the same, is compared by Aristotle to the person affected by grand mal, or to the drunk person, one who can “go off his head” for a short period, but once he comes to his senses, is absolutely and perfectly judicious.

The incontinent, therefore, at least to a certain degree, knows, 67 while the
intemperate, the wicked in a strict sense, does not know (though, as we have seen, this ignorance does not remove the responsibility). Notwithstanding the apparent exterior similarity between incontinent and intemperate behavior (seeing that both are mistaken and directed in a wrong direction), they are based on radical anthropological differences. In fact, while the reason of the intemperate person is diseased and prevents him/her from making the right choice, that of the incontinent person is healthy, solid, and “uncorrupt.” This explains why Aristotle holds that though the intemperate person is more curable than the incontinent one, he is in a worse condition than the person affected by akrasia, because “the most precious part of him is corrupted,” and he believes he is acting rightly, and does not repent for his actions. In fact, though the wicked person is not divided in his inner being, and though, exactly like the virtuous person, he is endowed with a soul at peace, Aristotle is of the mind that he is irreparably malicious, because he has definitively acquired a habitus he can no longer change. This habitus is so deeply rooted and has so spoiled his phusis, his perception of the world, that unlike the incontinent who “repents (metamele-tikos),” he does not perceive the wrongness of his choice.

The incontinent, on the contrary, sees the true target well, given that his principle, his reason, is in good condition, but desire, aiming toward a different direction from that indicated by reason, does not allow him to aim rightly and makes him miss his aim. In this sense, as has been observed: “in Aristotle’s view ... the incontinent does not think he ought to do the incontinent action before he is influenced by his passion.”

Reason conducts him in one direction and desire in another, exactly as occurs with a person whose limbs are paralyzed:

In this sense, the incontinent is of course ill, given that he is unable to control himself. He is unable to resist the impact of desires, but his illness has not yet become chronic. In other words, the incontinent person is intimately divided and dissociated, experiencing the interior laceration between the dictates of reason and the inability to follow them, because he “did not succeed in transforming his life’s ideal in an éthos.”

Therefore the incontinent person is wrong and knows he is wrong but, according to the subtle distinctions of Aristotelian discourse, he does not choose to do the wrong thing. On this issue, Aristotle is very clear:

An incontinent person acts from desire but not from choice; for incontinence acts against deliberate choice, vice in accordance with it.
The element of awareness of the act, in fact, does not imply in itself the choice, since proairesis, in Aristotle’s opinion, implicates that synergy of reason and desire that, instead, the internal divorce of the incontinent excludes totally.

Virtue, on the contrary, just as vice, involves choice (see NE VII.8, 1151a7: κατὰ τὴν προαίρεσιν ἔστην), namely the cooperation between desire and reason toward the attainment of the goal. In this sense, it can be said that the incontinent is in some way in an intermediate position between the temperate and the intemperate, between one who chooses rightly (and he chooses rightly because, being virtuous, “he sees the truth in each kind” and one who chooses wrongly. In fact, the incontinent person does not choose to do evil, yet he does it, pressed by desire to a situation different from the one indicated by reason.

Incontinence is not vice, because it does not involve choice, but also because vice is what corrupts reason (“virtue preserves the fundamental principle, vice destroys it”) the reason that, instead, in the incontinent is solid and in good condition, as we have seen. In this sense Aristotle must emphasize that

It is the intemperate who cannot be cured, whereas the incontinent man can.

**EVIL AS ERROR**

A third form of “acted evil,” namely evil as error, requires a much closer examination because, in a certain way, it bridges the two figures of “suffered” and “acted” evil. A fundamental passage of NE V.8, 1135b11–25 can be useful in beginning to examine this notion:

There are then three ways in which a man may injure his fellow. An injury done in ignorance (μετ’ ἀγνοίας) is an error (ἀμαρτήματα ἐστιν), the person affected or the act or the instrument or the result being other than the agent supposed; for example, he did not think to hit, or not with this missile, or not this person, or not with this result, but it happened that either the result was other than he expected (for instance he did not mean to inflict a wound but only a prick), or the person, or the missile. When the injury happens contrary to reasonable expectation, it is a misadventure (μετ’ ἀγνοίας), when, though not contrary to reasonable expectation, it is done without evil intent, it is a culpable error (ὅταν δὲ μὴ παραλόγως, ἁμαρτήματα); for an error is culpable when the cause of one’s ignorance lies in oneself (ἁμαρτάνει μὲν γὰρ ὅταν ἢ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ ἢ τῆς αἰτίας), but only a misadventure when the cause lies outside oneself (ἀτυχεῖ δ’ ὅταν ἐξωθεν). When an injury is done knowingly but not deliberately (εἰδὼς μὲν μὴ προβουλεύσας), it is an act of injustice or wrong; such, for instance, are injuries done through anger, or any other unavoidable or natural passion to which men are liable; since in committing these injuries and errors a man acts unjustly, and his action is an act of injustice, but he is not ipso facto unjust or wicked, for the injury was not done out of wickedness. When however an injury is done from choice, the doer is unjust and wicked.

The three kinds of damage or injury (τριῶν δὴ υἱῶν βλαβήν) can be visualized in the following table:
Error\textsuperscript{91} lies somewhat midway between misadventures, which are unexpected and for which one is not responsible (and which, therefore, lie within the notion of “suffered evil”) and unjust acts (for which one is fully responsible, and must therefore be counted as one of the “acted evils”). Like unjust action, error is certainly something voluntary, and therefore something for which the person must answer (and so, it is an “acted evil” as well), but its connection to the notion of ignorance makes it a very particular object, \textit{sui generis}.

On the other hand, the link between the fundamental question of not knowing\textsuperscript{92} and the notion of error, a link that raises many important ethical and juridical questions that cannot be addressed here,\textsuperscript{93} poses the following question: if someone makes an error because he does not know it is an error, how is it possible to consider him responsible? Concerning this, the Stagirite establishes a fundamental distinction for the notion of ignorance, because of its implications for the question of responsibility.

(1) An action can be performed \textit{in a state of ignorance}, in the sense that the person puts himself in a condition of not knowing. This kind of mistake, which is unforgivable,\textsuperscript{94} depends on who does it. This person, being the cause of his own ignorance, is fully responsible for the ignorance itself: “when ignorance is the cause of an action, the agent acts involuntarily and so is innocent; except when he is the cause of his own ignorance. In that case, when he acts in self-caused ignorance (\textit{ἀγνοίας αὐτὸς ἀἴτιος}) [and harms another] he inflicts a wrong, and will rightly be termed unjust.”\textsuperscript{95}

(2) But it can also be said that an action has been \textit{done out of ignorance, that is, due to ignorance}.\textsuperscript{96} The person who does an unjust action due to ignorance, namely “without knowing either the person injured, the instrument used, or the end aimed at,”\textsuperscript{97} “is only unfortunate (\textit{ἀτυχεῖ δέ}).”\textsuperscript{98} In fact, when ignorance is the cause of doing an action, this action is not done voluntarily, and thus one does not commit an injustice.\textsuperscript{99}

Here we see in play again the question of “suffered evil” that is not imputable to the agent, and see how the various profiles of the notion of evil interweave.

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\hline
\textbf{Misadventures} (\textit{ἀτυχήματα}) & \textbf{Errors} (\textit{ἁμαρτήματα}) & \textbf{Unjust acts} (\textit{ἀδικήματα}) \\
Agent not guilty & Agent guilty but not wicked & Agent guilty but not wicked \\
\textit{[suffered evil]} & \textit{[acted evil]} & \textit{[acted evil]} \\
\hline
(1) Contrary to reasonable expectation (\textit{τὰ μὲν μετ’ ἀγνοίας}) & (1) Performed in state of ignorance \textit{(τὰ μὲν μετ’ ἀγνοίας)} & (1) Acts performed knowingly (\textit{εἴδος}) \\
(2) Not contrary to reasonable expectation (\textit{μὴ παραλόγως}) & (2) But not deliberately (\textit{μὴ προβουλεύομαι})\textsuperscript{99} & (2) Acts of injustice but not wicked \textit{(ἀδικοὶ διὰ ταύτα οὐδὲ πονηροὶ)} \\
(3) Without evil intent (\textit{ἄνευ κακίας})\textsuperscript{98} & (3) Acts of injustice but not wicked \textit{(ἀδικοὶ διὰ ταύτα οὐδὲ πονηροὶ)} & \hline
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\caption{TO KAKON POLLACHÓS LEGETAI}
\end{table}
TO KAKON POLLACHÔS LEGETAI

EVIL “ACTED”: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Summing up briefly, evil can be performed for a number of reasons.

(1) Because there is the choice (proairesis) to perform it, and, in this case, one is “bad” and “wicked,” namely, one has acquired the habitus of vice (kakia). This kind of person is faulty, from Aristotle’s perspective, not only because he performs evil, but because he has acquired that specific bad disposition (hexis).

(2) Because one does not manage to control himself, namely because one is characterized by akrasia, a lack of self-control, incontinence, and, in this case, goes wrong and is aware of it. This person does not so much choose to act wrongly as he is swept into doing the wrong action by passion;

(3) There are evils and errors done by one who acts in state of ignorance (agnôia) (a complex notion that requires many distinctions). Such a person is considered responsible for his own actions, but his responsibility must always be calibrated secundum quid.

In this brief overview of the notion of moral evil in Aristotle it emerges that, in every case, evil in and of itself is not desired because, as indicated in the beginning of the NE and, more in general, the overall teleological shape of the Aristotelian view, everything aims for the good.

By nature (φύσει) the end is always a good . . . but in contravention of nature and by perversion (παρὰ φύσιν δὲ καὶ διαστροφὴν) not the good but the apparent good is the end.

Evil, therefore, cannot be wanted by anyone, and in fact it is wanted neither by the wicked, who is inclined to it believing erroneously that it is good, nor by the incontinent, who does not want it (given that the incontinent person acts against his will and performs an action that he himself thinks he should not to do but, because of his weakness, is attracted by it and so performs it, though knowing it is evil). It is no accident that Aristotle underlines that:

By nature good is the object of wish (ἡ βούλησις φύσει μὲν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἐστί), but evil is also its object in contravention of nature (παρὰ φύσιν δὲ καὶ τοῦ κακοῦ), by nature one wishes good, against nature and by perversion one even wishes evil.

Nevertheless, Aristotle sees evil as a reality to measure oneself against, to examine analytically in its different forms and facets, yet a reality that in many aspects is “insubstantial.” For the Stagirite, “there is nothing that is good in itself or evil in itself; good and evil can be applied to every category of nature.” In other words, evil is experienced, in many forms and in many ways, but Aristotle refuses to make it an “autonomous” reality. In this sense,

(1) Evil does not have a substantiability on the ontological level. Given that there is no principle of evil (and given that “evil does not exist apart from things (οὐκ ἔστι τὸ κακὸν παρὰ τὰ πράγματα,” as we can read clearly in Metaphysics IX.9, 1151a17–18), evil is reduced to privation or to defect.

(2) At the logical level, as well, it depends on the notion of good.

(3) Thus, on the ethical level, the question of evil, as we have said before, is at once formally excluded (because it is totally extraneous to the teleological horizon to which the human being belongs) and
rooted strongly and in myriad ways in the ground of “human philosophy.”

It is true, according to Aristotle, that there are no human beings who want evil, but it is also true that there are many bad human beings, and that human beings are wrong in many ways.

When one reads Aristotle, it is important not to yield to the temptation to simplify all the articulations and variables of his discourse. Instead, one should try to let the polychromy of his discourse live and respect it as such, integrating the various components in order to delineate as much as possible the extreme variety and richness of reality.

“Each thought structure, or truth system, is an instrument through which the world can be understood and integrated . . . Perceptions of reality are multiple, and truth systems are multiple. Multiplicity produces a view of the world that is rich and broad. This attitude toward truth means the rejection of all reductionism.”

So in Aristotle evil can be “said in many ways,” and not only because it has many facets, but because moral evil itself is many things. In fact, evil is each of the vices, but not only for some evils exceed the strict horizon of vice as in the case of “bad” passions, or incontinence and—a question not examined here—of brutishness, yet they are and remain evils.

Evil can be committed because one does not know, or because one is not capable of restraining oneself, or because one does not succeed in avoiding the excess or the defect, failing to follow the fundamental rule of the golden mean, or one can be wrong even by simply acting or by feeling a passion, given that, as we have seen, there are intrinsically malicious passions and actions, to which one cannot apply the rule of the golden mean since these are always wrong. In any case, at least “acted” evil—given that there is and there can be no responsibility for “suffered” evil—is voluntary, albeit not wished for (but per accidens).

To come back to the initial quotation, then, evil has many forms (polueides), or in other words, it is a πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον. But these different forms are united, avoiding dispersion and, at the same time, the equivocity or homonymy of the term kakon, by the fact that all these forms of evil (both moral and, more generally, linked to the ontological, physical, or logical spheres) concern a common term, pros hen. Evil, in fact, in every case and in the different meanings that it assumes, indicates a bad functioning, a failed realization of one’s ergon, of one’s nature (phusis). The soul of a wicked man who does not know what good is functions badly. The soul of an incontinent person, who does not control his desire and channel it into a right end functions badly. In terms of ontology, a being that does not direct itself completely toward its ultimate end, that is hindered in the process toward the realization of its form and toward the good, functions badly.

Aristotelian thought does not have a principle of evil; evil as separate substance is not envisioned. But evil is inside the substance when it fails to realize itself, when it lacks the capacity to follow its nature and, therefore, to realize it. Because if it is true that

Man is one of the things that are excellent by nature,
it is also true that

A bad man can do ten thousand times more harm than an animal.
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In this sense, according to Aristotle, evil not only exists, but exists in many ways. Indeed, even more, in endless ways.\(^{12}\)

Arianna Fermani

NOTES

1 The translation of \textit{Magna Moralia} is (with some alterations) by G. C. Armstrong, 2006. From now on the work will be cited as MM.

2 The translation of \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} is (with some alterations) by H. Rackham, 1962.

3 The notion of evil has many shades of meaning: ontological, metaphysical, gnoseological, but also anthropological and political. It is obviously impossible to examine all these meanings and their implications in this paper. There is the notion of \textit{stere-sis} (approached, specifically, in \textit{Metaphysics} V.22), the fundamental articulation of the notion of evil in ontological-metaphysical terms. Another fundamental question for the understanding of evil in ontological terms is matter (see Fitzgerald, 1965, 59–78 and Owens, 1965, 79–93). For an overview of the fundamental articulations of the notion of evil in the three ethical treatises, consult the heading Male/Mali in my \textit{Indice ragionato dei concetti}, in Fermani, 2008, 1295–6.

4 There is a great debate about the authenticity of the three ethical treatises and, in particular, about MM, which is generally held to be doubtful. I cannot pursue the question here, but encourage the reader to see my \textit{Saggio Introdottivo}, in Fermani, 2008, XCVIIIff.

5 See NE I.1, 1094a3: “Good is that at which all things aim” (τἀγαθόν, οὗ πάντ’ ἐφίεται).

6 See, for instance, besides NE VI.13, 1144b4ff., MM I.34, 1197b37–1987a1: “in every province there is a kind of excellence which arises spontaneously by nature; irrational impulses towards what is brave and just”; MM II.3, 1199b38–1200a1: “we have stated that in the case of those virtues which arise by nature, the mere impulse towards what is good exists apart from reason.”

7 It is no coincidence that Russell, 1977, 149, n. 16, considers it best not to dwell on Aristotelian’s thought at all: “I do not treat the work of Aristotle here for two reasons. First, the influence of Aristotle upon subsequent thought before his revival in the twelfth century was minimal in comparison with that of Plato. Second, Aristotle for the most part turned back from Plato’s dualism in the direction of monism. All motion comes from the First Cause and is directed toward the Final Cause. Good and Evil are not separate forms.” It is viewed differently by Bolotin, 1999, 159–69. “Although Greek has no word that quite corresponds to the English word ‘evil,’ Aristotle speaks clearly enough of what we have in mind when we say that Hitler and Stalin were evil” (159).

8 In this context, the very important figure of Socrates cannot be examined; we can only refer, among others, to Burger, 2008.

9 See NE II.6, 110b29–31.

10 This theme would have had in Aristotle, differently from other philosophers, “a sort of eclipse” (Brogi, 2006, 43, my translation).

11 Naturally this is only one of the possible articulations of the theme. Russell suggests an analogous distinction: “A distinction is conventionally made between ‘natural evil’ and ‘moral evil.’ Natural evil consists of destructive ‘acts of God’ or of nature, such as tornadoes or cancer, and moral evil proceeds from the will of a human or other intelligent being” (Russell, 1977, 24). Another division is that offered in the work \textit{Divisions} (I do not deal here with the wide and debated question of the authenticity of this work; see E. Berti, in Rossitto, 2005, 5ff.). \textit{Division} 57 distinguishes, in fact, in accordance with the division of the goods, evil of the soul (as injustice), of the body (as disease), and exterior evils (hard luck).

12 Radice and Bombacigno, 2005.


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15 “Bad condition; mostly in the moral sense: wickedness, depravity” (Liddell-Scott, 1961, 1149).
16 Consider, for example, the term kakia (which occurs 122 times in the whole corpus, 40 in NE, 15 in MM, and 15 in EE), or the adjectives phauleos (384 total occurrences, of which 71 in NE, 73 in MM, and 26 in EE) and aišchros (meaning: causing shame, dishonoring, base; 107 total occurrences, of which 38 in NE, 3 in MM, and 5 in EE).
17 Mochthêros: in bad condition . . . knavish, rascally (Liddell-Scott, 1961, 1149); phauleos has, among the other meanings, mean, bad (Liddell-Scott, 1961, 1919). On the social-political level, all these figures, as observed by Silvia Gastaldi, 1987, have in common the fact of being excluded by the (very restricted, to tell the truth) circle of the best men (see, in particular, Gastaldi, 1987, 69–70).
18 Pone-ros: “in moral sense, worthless, knavish” (Liddell-Scott, 1961, 1447). The a-specific meaning of pone-ros is attested by Rhetoric II, 1401b, in which we read that “all thieves are bad (ponêroi).”
19 See Gastaldi, 1987, 70. Others view it differently, for instance, Develin, 1973, 71–9, 76–7; Irrera, 2008, 289–313, 293, n. 10, who does not think that phauleos can be considered synonymous with kakos (although Irrera reminds us, rightly, that phauleos, in EE VIII.3, 1249b16–21, is opposed to kakos, beauty. For more on the topic of beauty and its links with the notion of good, we refer to Irrera, 2011, in particular 48ff.
20 “Badness in quality, opp. ἀρετή (excellence) . . . moral badness, vice” (Liddell-Scott, 1961, 861).
21 Mochthêria: “mostly in moral sense, wickedness, depravity” (Liddell-Scott, 1961, 1149).
24 The same can be said for the notion of mochthêria, which, in addition to the already mentioned meanings, also means “lack of skill, incapacity” (Liddell-Scott, 1961, 1149).
25 Speaking of the different kinds of evil actions and of their various implications on the juridical level, in NE IX.3, 1163b12, the term kakourgia also appears, a term that in English can be translated as “wrongdoing.”
29 On the widely discussed topic of will and of its link with the notion of freedom and of free will, see Gauthier-Jolif, 2002, II, 1, 218ff. I share fully the opinion of Berti, expressed in “Ragione pratica e normatività in Aristotele” (Berti, 2008, 25–38): “The rational desire of the end, that is of the Good, for Aristotle is the ‘will’ (βουλήσις), which is not free, because whether it has as its object a real Good or an apparent Good depends on character (δύναμις): the will of the virtuous person has, in fact, as its object a real Good, while the one of the vicious man has as its object an apparent Good” (37, my translation).
30 The translation of Rhetoric is by J. H. Freese, 1959.
31 NE III.5, 1114a4–7: “men are themselves responsible for having become careless through living carelessly, as they are for being unjust or profligate if they do wrong or pass their time in drinking and dissipation. They acquire a particular quality by constantly acting in a particular way.”
33 “Pain is the destruction (ἡ λύπη φθοράς)” (NE X.2, 1173b7).
34 NE X.2, 1172b19: “pain is intrinsically an object of avoidance at all.” All pain, in fact, “is either absolutely evil, or evil as being in some way an impediment to activity” (NE VII.13, 1153b1ff.).
35 In reality there are various articulations of the notion of passion, as we have seen well above.
36 NE III.5, 1113b28–30: “nobody tries to encourage us to do things that do not depend upon ourselves and are not voluntary, since it is no good our being persuaded not to feel heat or pain or hunger or the like, because we shall feel them all the same.”
37 “When I am afraid, something is frightening me; when I am angry, something is angering me. When in general I am experiencing an emotion or feeling of the sort which Aristotle
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would call a pathos, something is affecting me” (Kosman, 1980, 104–5).
38 While in EE VIII.2, 1247b3–4 it is stated that luck is “a cause of goods or evils.”
39 MM II.8, 1207a7–8: “we look to God, as controlling good and evil things.”
41 NE III.5, 1115a22–4: “nor yet is a man cowardly if he fears insult to his wife and children, or envy, or the like; nor courageous if he shows a bold face when about to undergo a flogging.”
42 “There are some terrors which we pronounce beyond human endurance, and these of course are fearful to everyone in his senses” (NE III.10, 1115b6–7). Those who, faced with these evils, go wrong, must be excused, since these evils are unbearable for human nature: “in some cases again, such submission though not praised is condoned, when a man does something wrong through fear of penalties that impose too great a strain on human nature (τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν), and that no one could endure” (NE III.1, 1110a23–6).
43 EE I.5, 1215b18–22.
44 “The accidents of fortune are many and vary in degree of magnitude; and although small pieces of good luck, also of misfortune, clearly do not change the whole course of life, yet great and repeated successes will render it more blissful, since both of their own nature they help to embellish it, and also they can be nobly and virtuously utilized” (NE I.11, 1100b18–33).
45 “The happy man therefore will possess the element of stability in question, and will remain happy all his life; since he will be always or at least most often employed in doing and contemplating the things that are in conformity with virtue. And he will bear changes of fortunes modestly, and with perfect propriety in every way, being as he is ‘good in very truth’ and ‘four-square without reproach’” (NE I.10, 1100b18–22).
46 NE I.11, 1101a6–13. Even if these evils cannot be endured and even if in the moment in which the wise person experiences them he cannot be happy, he, unlike other human beings, has the possibility of looking toward the recomposition of that ordered whole that is the good life. For further development of this idea, see Fermani, 2006, 102ff.
47 In fact, both in EE II.2, 1220b12–14, NE II.5, 1105b21–3, and in MM I.7, 1186a12–14, a list of passions is proposed and identified as those phenomena followed by pleasure and pain. Elsewhere, instead, pleasure is identified with pathos. In NE II.3, 1105a1–3, in fact, we read that “the susceptibility to pleasure has grown up with all of us from the cradle. Hence this feeling (τὸ πάθος) is hard to eradicate.” Also more clearly, in MM I.8, 1186a33–4, we read that “the affections are . . . themselves pains or pleasures (τὰ δὲ πάθη ήτοι λύπαι εἰσὶν ἢ ἱδοναί).” On this topic see Konstan and Rutter, 2003.
48 I am not able here to focus on the different articulations of the notion of pathos. See the chapter “La passione come nozione ‘in molti modi polivoca’” in Fermani, 2012, 155ff.
49 They are passions that arise in some way already good and measured: see NE II.7, 1108a30–1: “there are also modes of observing a mean in the sphere of and in relation to the emotions (ἰοί δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς παθήματι καὶ ποιεῖ τὸ πάθος μεσότητας).”
50 NE II.6, 1107a8–15. For a comment on this passage, similar to EE II.3, 1221b18–26, see Gauthier-Jolif, 2002, II, 2, 151–2.
51 For a deep analysis of this notion see, among others, Brickhouse, 2003.
52 NE III.1, 1110b31–2.
53 Vice is something voluntary, as is written in NE III.5, 1113b16–17; 1114a21–2.
54 This is one of the fundamental criteria for considering an action voluntary.
55 MM II.6, 1203a27–9. Choice, in addition to awareness and disposition, constitutes for Aristotle the mark of virtuous and wicked actions. See NE II.4, 1105a28–33 “acts done in conformity with the virtues are not done justly or temperately if they themselves are of a certain sort, but only if the agent also is in a certain state of mind when he does them: first he must act with knowledge; secondly he must deliberately choose the act, and choose it for its own sake; and thirdly the act must spring from a fixed and permanent disposition of character.” In this sense it can be said that the temperate and the intemperate person act knowingly, on the basis of a choice and of a sound akritēs and of akritēs. But it is a difference that, as it
has been rightly stated, is only interior, since their exterior behavior proves identical (see Gould, 1999, 377: “The enkratēs and the sophrón differ internally but not in their external behaviour”).

“The ignorance of the incontinent is a moot issue of incontinence” (see Natali, 1989, 92).

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EE VII.2, 1235b25–6.

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This is the most characteristic sign of the incontinent. As stated by Woods, 1990, 229: “Thus, the phenomenon of akrasia is associated by Aristotle, as by many other philosophers, with the possibility of a struggle or conflict between the rational and the non-rational elements in a human being. The outcome of the struggle may be that reason fails to maintain its position.”

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NE VII.7, 1150b29–30.
(προοίμιον) and acts against it. The MM describes what is sound in the incontinent person by saying that he has correct reason that opposes his going after the things that his appetite leads him toward” (Irwin, 2008, 35).

84. “En atención a esta particular disociación interior, puede decirse que el incontinente ocupa, desde el punto de vista sistemático, una suerte de posición intermedia entre el temperante y el intemperante. Tanto el temperante como, paradójicamente, también el intemperante revelan, cada uno a su manera, una integración unitaria de ἰός e idei de vida” (Vigo, 2011, 338ff).

85. “In the case of the intoxicated, for example, those who do harm under the influence of drink inflicts a wrong; since they are the cause of their own ignorance (τή γάρ ἁγνοίας αὐτοί εἶναι αύτοι). They were free to refrain from the excess which robbed them of their wits, and allowed them [for example] to strike a father. And so it is with all other kinds of self-caused ignorance. Those who inflict injury therein, are unjust; while those who act in ignorance of which they are not the cause—whose ignorance, on the contrary, is of itself the cause of their acting as they do—are not unjust” (MM I.33, 1195a31–7). It is very interesting to notice how the distinction, on the ethical level, between two forms of ignorance has an exact confirmation on juridical ground. As Aristotle reminds us in Pol. II.12, 1274b18–23, the ancient legislator Pittacus made a law contemplating the fact that one who commits a crime because of drunkenness, not only must not be absolved, but must be doubly punished: “a special law of his is that if men commit an assault when drunk they are to pay a larger fine than those who offend when sober; because since more men are insolent when drunk than when sober he had regard not to the view that drunken offenders are rightly held less guilty, but to expediency” (the translation of Politics is by H. Rackham, 1959).

86. “In fact, one can act unjustly without having the habitus of vice, namely without being wicked. And as it is confirmed by other analogous passages. See, for instance, Rhet. I.13, 1374b5–10.”

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97 MM I.33, 1195a.
98 MM I.33, 1195a24.
99 MM I.33, 1195a28–9. A similar picture is provided in NE V.8, 1136a5–9: “Of involuntary actions some are pardonable and some are not. Errors not merely committed in ignorance but caused by ignorance are pardonable; those committed in ignorance, but caused not by that ignorance but by unnatural or inhuman passion, are unpardonable.” On the question of ignorance and of its links with error, a theme that cannot be pursued here, refer to my paper “L’errore, il falso e le scienze in Aristotele” (forthcoming).

100 NE III.5, 1114a10–11: “only an utterly senseless person can fail to know that our characters are the result of our conduct.”

101 On the topic of nature we will return before long.

102 EE II.10, 1227a18–22.

103 NE V.9, 1136b6–9: “the incontinent man . . . acts contrary to wish, since no one wishes for a thing that he does not think to be good, and the incontinent man does what he thinks he ought not to do.”

104 EE II.10, 1227a28–30.

105 Russell, 1977, 149, n. 16.


107 See notes 3 and 118.

108 As seen clearly in Topics, in which we read that evil must be defined in relation to good, and not the contrary, see Topics VI.9, 147b17–25.

109 There are neither technologies nor sciences that aim for it. See, for instance, the already quoted passage of the beginning of the NE (I.1, 1094a1ff.), every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or undertaking, seems to aim at some good”; MM I.11 1182a34–5: “no science and no faculty exists for the sake of an evil end (οὐδ' επιστήμη οὔτε δύναμις ἐνεχειν κακοῦ ἐστίν)”; Russell, 1977, 37.


111 There are those who, like Bolotin, 1999, 160, reduce the theme of evil to that of injustice: “Aristotle does, of course, discuss the theme of evil, or injustice, in his political writings” (my italics). On this topic refer to Fermarsi, 2012, chapter “L’eccesso nel vizio: l’esempio della bestialità,” 138ff.


113 See NE II.6, 1107a8–15.

114 For more on the very complex topic of pros hen or focal meaning, see Owen, 1986; Ferejohn, 1980.

115 “The function of man is the active exercise of the soul’s faculties in conformity with rational principle” (NE I.7, 1098a7–8).


117 Russell, 1977, 149: “The thought of Aristotle . . . did not admit a principle of evil.” “There was nothing in the thought of Aristotle to encourage the concept of a principle of evil, or its personification. Unformed matter as such, hule, may hinder progress toward the ultimate goal, but it cannot be considered a principle of evil” (Russell, 1977, 149, n. 16).

118 Privation, in fact, means precisely the incapacity of something to be and, therefore, to realize itself: “We speak of ‘privation’: a) in one sense, if a thing does not possess an attribute which is a natural possession” (Met. V.22, 1022b22–4).

119 The notion of nature has, in Aristotle, both descriptive and normative value.

120 EE VII.2, 1237a16.

121 NE VII.6, 1150a7–8.

122 “Evil is a form of the unlimited (τὸ γὰρ κακὸν τοῦ ἀπείρου)” (NE II.6, 1106b29–30).

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