Aristotle’s Ethical Epistemology and the Uniqueness Thesis

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I. Introduction

Imagine two phronimoi engaged in a conversation about applied ethics. They are discussing human action, what a person ought to do in a particular situation, and what ethical concepts and reasons can explain the rightness or wrongness of different choices of action.

Now here is the question that will guide the discussion of this paper: In the scenario described above, is it possible for these two phronimoi to disagree? That is, can two morally mature, ethically knowledgeable and experienced individuals bring their ethical knowledge and experience to bear while engaging in a kind of joint deliberation about right action and come to differing conclusions about what action is right to perform?

Of course, I am interested in not just any answer to this question, but Aristotle’s. And, as will be explained and argued for in this paper, I come to the conclusion that his answer is, yes, it is possible for phronimoi to disagree about what action is correct in a particular situation. Whether my thesis strikes you as obviously right or obviously wrong right away, the real value of thinking through this question is to work out just what ethical knowledge and reasoning consists in for Aristotle. We might discover some overlooked corners of his theory.

II. The Uniqueness Thesis

Epistemologists working in the area of peer disagreement have recently engaged in a great deal of debate about what they call the “Uniqueness Thesis”:

\[(UT) \text{ For a given set of evidence } E \text{ and a proposition } P, \text{ only one doxastic attitude about } P \text{ is rational given } E.\]

Where “doxastic attitudes” about P include (exhaustively) (i) believing that P is true, (ii) believing that P is false, and (iii) suspending judgment about P, the Uniqueness Thesis (UT) lays claim that only one of these

\footnote{This is based on Feldman (2006) and White’s (2005).}
attitudes may be *rationally* adopted in light of a given set of evidence. As such, UT draws out a connection between *rationality* and *evidence*, namely that they are connected in such a way that evidence determines the rationality of our doxastic attitudes by limiting what doxastic attitudes may be counted rational.

Now, the Uniqueness Thesis is not universally embraced. Far from it. Recent literature in the epistemology of disagreement is rich with publications examining counterexamples to the thesis and undermining it in various and interesting ways.² It is not my aim to weigh in on this debate, though. Instead, I want to answer the following question: Is Aristotle committed to the Uniqueness Thesis in his theory of moral knowledge?

To answer this question, we first need to lay out the parameters of what we are asking. What exactly is at stake with UT? What does it entail? What are its epistemological lessons? Most importantly, it seems to me, the upshot of UT is that it rules out the possibility of disagreement between epistemic peers. I suggest that we follow Tom Kelly in our consideration of what establishes two individuals as “epistemic peers”:

Neither of us has any particular reason to think that he or she enjoys some advantage over the other when it comes to assessing considerations of the relevant kind, or that he or she is more or less reliable about the relevant domain. Indeed, let us suppose that, to the extent that we do possess evidence about who is more reliable—evidence afforded, perhaps, by a comparison of our past track records—such evidence suggests that we are more or less equally reliable when it comes to making judgments about the domain in question.³

In short, epistemic peers are equal with respect to (i) their capacity for “assessing considerations of the relevant kind,” i.e. drawing up and evaluating the salient evidence in the situation, and (ii) their track-record in reasoning and drawing conclusions about similar subject-matter. Note that this description of epistemic peers does not entail one way or the other that epistemic peers of this stripe will have the same doxastic attitude when presented with a body of evidence. Indeed, as Kelly has described things, there is plenty of room in logical space for people who are equally matched with respect to their skills in assessing and judging evidence to end up drawing different conclusions. Take, for example, the common experience of seeking multiple opinions from

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² Deniers of UT have adopted the name “permissivists” for their view that a given body of evidence does not determine any particular doxastic attitude as singularly rational but permits different attitudes. See: Kelly (2014); Schoenfield (2012). For defenses of UT, see: Greco and Hedden (*forthcoming*); Matheson (2011).

³ Kelly (2010).
doctors when seeking treatment. Quite often, medical doctors draw different conclusions after examining a patient, but these differences in opinion do not diminish their status as experts and epistemic peers.

But if the Uniqueness Thesis is true and only one doxastic attitude is permissible given a body of evidence, then people who are equally matched in their skills of assessing and judging evidence and who are experts in the subject matter of that evidence will necessarily reach the same conclusion when presented with the same body of evidence. They will agree. They will have the same doxastic attitude as one another, and given that they are experts, presumably they will have the correct or rational doxastic attitude, the only one that is rational given the body of evidence. In fact, if UT is true, then disagreement between these peers is impossible because they cannot have differing doxastic attitudes toward a proposition, in light of a given body of evidence, while also being epistemic peers.

III. Epistemic peers and disagreement in Aristotle

It strikes me as evident that Aristotle’s theory of knowledge allows for the existence of epistemic peers, but it is less clear whether or not he allows for such peers to disagree with one another. Since this is the central question of this paper, we ought to carry out the inquiry as carefully as we can. The place to begin is in observing that Aristotle distinguishes three different types of expertise within his epistemological theory: scientific, productive, and practical. The concern of this paper is practical (henceforth, ethical) expertise, but I will describe the scientific variety before starting in on the ethical because Aristotle himself finds it helpful to examine the latter through comparison with the former, and I find that strategy helpful, too.

Scientific knowledge consists in understanding explanatory connections between different facts in the world. Some of these facts are theoretical or observable phenomena that constitute the theorems of the science. Other facts isolate the essence or nature of entities involved in

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1 In EN 6.3 Aristotle says, “There are five states by which the soul truths: craft (technē), scientific knowledge (epistēme), practical wisdom (phronēsis), philosophical wisdom (sophia), and intuitive intellect (nous).” The first three of these are what I have isolated as the “three main kinds of expertise” because they are the excellent psychic states corresponding to the three kinds of “thought” (dianoia) he describes in E.1 of the Metaphysics. The remaining philosophical wisdom and nous are folded together in his conception of scientific knowledge anyway, so that they may be taken as filling out the scientific variety of expertise rather than consisting further kinds (EN 6.7). And, just for the sake of completeness, Aristotle also suggests that nous is operative in practical wisdom, despite tying it to scientific knowledge in EN 6.7, see Kathleen Harbin’s work in this area.

2 “Theoretical” theorems are found in sciences which are abstract, such as the mathematical sciences. The Pythagorean theorem, for example, is abstract rather than observable. Though ancient geometry was practiced through diagrams that illustrated the proofs, the proposition that stands as the theorem is quite abstract.
those phenomena. And a smaller batch of facts capture immutable and self-evident truths that pervade nature, e.g. “things which equal the same thing equal each other.” These facts are related to each other through various causes: formal, material, efficient, and final. And such causal links establish an explanatory matrix in the world. The scientist—i.e. the person with scientific knowledge—is someone who grasps precisely this matrix and understands it in the form of a set of demonstrations, which are themselves perfect syllogisms that capture the causal links between relevant facts. As such, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the way the world is and the way the scientist understands the world to be.

Given this direct mapping between scientific truth and scientific knowledge (Aristotle is a realist, after all), there will necessarily also be a one-to-one correspondence between two (or more) scientists in how they understand the world. They cannot disagree with one another without one of them simply being wrong. Or, put another way, insofar as they truly are epistemic peers (and experts) in their scientific domain, the demonstrations grasped by one will match the demonstrations grasped by another because the demonstrations of each capture the very same explanatory connections in the world, and they will not disagree with regard to their scientific judgments.

It is worth noting here that the impossibility of this disagreement is a result of Aristotle’s quite evident commitment to the Uniqueness Thesis with respect to scientific knowledge. The world presents evidence for what I have called the matrix of explanatory connections between facts. This evidence, in turn, limits what doxastic attitudes about the world count as rational. With a given body of evidence about, say, the explanatory connections between facts pertinent in the domain of physics, there is only one rational judgment for a person to make, and that is the judgment (or set of judgments) constitutive of having scientific knowledge of physics.

Ethical expertise departs from scientific knowledge in many significant respects. As Aristotle notes at the beginning of EN 6, ethical reasoning is carried out through deliberation, not demonstration, and it is concerned with things that are particular and true only for the most part, as opposed to science’s exclusive regard for what is universal and true of necessity (6.1 1139a6–15). He even asserts that it is by different parts of the rational soul that a person may develop scientific knowledge, on the one hand, and ethical expertise, on the other (6.1 1139a6). Such

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This is in stark contrast to the “observable” theorems of, e.g., biology and astronomy which might look something like “felines give birth to litters of seven kittens, for the most part” and “the moon cycles through all its phases in 29.5 earth days.”

This is Euclid’s first “common notion” and functions neither as a theorem for him nor as a fact that defines any of the entities he is working with. Nevertheless, it plays an explanatory role in his geometry and therefore qualifies as a first principle.
differences reach nearly to the core of these conceptions of expertise, overhauling every aspect except the one feature that stands as the point in common among them and substantiates their existence as forms of knowledge: that they consist, most centrally, in grasping an account (logos) of things in their domain. But given that the metaphysical, psychological, and epistemological differences are what they are, we cannot take for granted that Aristotle’s commitment to UT in the scientific domain(s) will carry over to the ethical domain.

So we must begin from scratch with ethical expertise, and the place to start is with determining just what it is that two phronimoi might disagree about, were disagreement possible for them. I propose that this would be what Aristotle calls “to prakton”—“the thing to be done” (6.5 1140b3; 6.8 1142a25; 6.11 1143a35). This “thing to be done” is, according to Aristotle, a particular action in particular circumstances, the target of any given instance of deliberation, and the object of choice. The following passages convey this conception:

[T1] Practical wisdom is not only about things that are general (τῶν καθόλου), but it must also be familiar with (γνωσίειν) particulars (τὰ καθ’ ἐκαστα). For it is capable of being put into action (πρακτική) and action (praxis) is concerned with the particular (τὰ καθ’ ἐκαστα). (EN 1141b14–16)

[T2] That practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήµη) is clear. For, as has been said, it is concerned with the ultimate (τοῦ ἐσχάτου), since the thing to be done is such a thing as that (τὸ πρακτὸν). (EN 6.8 1142a23–24)

[T3] All things to be done (ἄπαντα τὰ πρακτά) are among the things that are particular (τῶν καθ’ ἐκαστα) and ultimate (τῶν ἐσχάτων). For the phronimos must be familiar with these [particular facts], and understanding (σύνεσις) and judgement (γνώµη) concern the things to be done, and these are the ultimates. (EN 6.11 1143a32–35)

Further to being particular and the object of choice and terminus of deliberation, the thing to be done (to prakton) is, generally speaking, the whole point of Aristotle’s ethical inquiry. When he says that “end aimed at [for ethical inquiry] is not knowledge (γνώσις), but action (πράξις),” he reveals what is certainly the most important feature of his ethical epistemology: that a person’s ethical knowledge is complete only when they have grasped and understood what they should do (to prakton) (EN
By this reckoning, we could even say that the proper object of practical wisdom is the extremely particular to prakton—analogously to how the proper object of scientific knowledge is the conclusion of a demonstrative syllogism, i.e. a theorem of the science. Such a suggestion might surprise and unsettle those scholars among us who interpret Aristotle’s practical wisdom as consisting of both a theoretical component and, separately, an “applied” component. This is a different battle from the one to do with the possibility of disagreement between phronimoi, however, and one that cannot adequately be waged here. The lesson to take from the passages above is that reasonable disagreement, if it is possible between phronimoi, will concern what action is to prakton in a given situation.

Before moving on, I want to sketch two possibilities for the shape of such disagreement. One possibility is what I will call Strong Disagreement, the other is Weak Disagreement. According to Strong Disagreement, one phronimos believes that the prakton action is p and the other phronimos believes that p is not prakton. That is, the second phronimos believes something like not-p and q (because they choose action q with the explicit judgment that p would be the wrong choice of action). According to Weak Disagreement, two phronimoi disagree just in case one chooses p and the other chooses q, but where this disagreement does not also involve the judgment on the part of one or the other that not-q or not-p, respectively. As we move forward, this distinction will become helpful.

IV. A Snapshot of Phronesis

There are several features of Aristotle’s conception of practical wisdom that we must hold fixed and within sight throughout our discussion. First, practical wisdom is identified alongside scientific knowledge, productive knowledge, philosophical wisdom, and intuitive intellect as being a state (ἕξις) by which the soul truths (οἰς ἀληθεύει ἡ ψυχή) (EN 6.3 1139b15–17). This means that practically wise people are, in some deeply important sense, getting things right about a certain aspect of the world (not just any aspect, but the aspect that is the concern of ethics). And, even more strongly, since Aristotle does not merely predicate this truth-grasping function of practical wisdom, but sets practical wisdom

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1. “[The young person] is inexperienced in the actions that occur in life, and the arguments [of ethics] are made from these [actions] and are about them” (EN 1.3 1095a3–4).
3. I realize that the translation “by which the soul truths” strains the conventions of English, but the verb in the Greek here is ἀληθεύει and means something in the vicinity of “to tell the truth” or “to arrive at truth” or “to prove true,” and it is my view that Aristotle intends all of these separate connotations simultaneously. So while my translation is awkward, it is nevertheless best. Thank you to Simon Shogry for first introducing me to this way of translating the idea.
alongside scientific knowledge and philosophical wisdom and the other hexeis and predicates the truth-grasping function of all of them in one go, we should understand the “truthing,” or getting things right, to be robust and objective. Thus, while the phronimos is certainly someone who has a sophisticated ability to process information in her environment and engage in means-end reasoning, her distinction is not merely in these procedural skills. She also just plainly latches onto ethical truths similarly to how scientists latch onto scientific truths.

Nevertheless, the procedural skillset is integral to her excellence and fills out the second feature of phronesis that we must take note of. The phronimos is superior to other moral agents in her developed capacities for (i) perceiving the good in ethical situations (EN 3.4), (ii) reasoning about what means “tend toward a good end” (EN 6.9), (iii) reasoning in such a way as to achieve her good end through the right means (EN 6.9), (iv) reasoning (relatively) quickly (EN 6.9), and (v) reasoning with reference to the ends of ethics, i.e. happiness (EN 6.9). Here I depart from the McDowellian tradition which seeks to summarize the entirety of ethical correctness in what he often describes as a special kind of “sensitivity” to the moral facts of the matter that make ethical situations what they are. Instead, follow Aristotle in enumerating several distinct skills which, though mutually complementary in many ways, are both conceptually distinguishable and independently realizable. What is striking about the phronimos is that in her person we do find these skills realized together.

It seems that Aristotle thinks these procedural skills are especially important in the ethical domain because of the kind of variation that a moral agent is up against in her deliberations.

[T4] Now every class of men deliberates about the things that are to be done (πράξεως) by them. And in the case of the exacting and self-ruling varieties of sciences there is no

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10 McDowell (1979) also stretches this conception of moral excellence identified with situational sensitivity to be inclusive of all the virtues, resulting in his commitment to a unity of the virtues thesis: “Since there are obviously no limits on the possibilities for compresence, in the same situation, of circumstances of the sorts proper sensibilities to which constitute all the virtues, the argument can be generalized: no one virtue can be fully possessed except by a possessor of all of them, that is, a possessor of virtue in general. Thus the particular virtues are not a batch of independent sensibilities. Rather, we use the concepts of the particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one’s behaviour. It is a single complex sensitivity of this sort which we are aiming to instil when we aim to inculcate a moral outlook” (333).

11 If these procedural skills could not be realized separately, then Aristotle would make little sense in asserting, e.g., that some people attain what they want (accomplishing (ii)) but “not by the right means” (failing (iii)) (EN 6.9 1142b25–26).
Deliberation, for instance about the letters of the alphabet (for we do not doubt how they should be written); but however many things that are brought about through ourselves, but not always in the same way, are the things about which we deliberate, for instance questions of medical treatment or of money-making. And we do so more in the case of navigation than in gymnastics, to the extent that the former has been less exactly worked out (ἦττον δυκάρβωται), and again about other things in the same ratio, and more also concerning the arts than the sciences; for we have more doubt about the former (μᾶλλον διστάξουμεν). Deliberation is concerned with things that happen in a certain way for the most part (ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ), but in which the event is obscure (ἄδηλος), and with things in which it is indeterminate (ἀδιόριστον). (3.3 1112a33–b9)

This paper will have a great deal more to say about what it is that makes objects of deliberation so variable and indeterminate, but for now it will suffice to note that deliberation really is necessitated in the ethical domain because of the (extreme) degree of doubt we have regarding what goes on in that domain. In fact, that doubt is so pronounced that it is difficult to imagine what mastery of the domain might amount to. Hence, I think, the great fascination we all have with the interminable problem of defining ethical expertise. In stating the above, Aristotle exposes his own doubts and seems to side with those who would say that ethical problems are not so much solved as they are managed, seeing how the ethical domain and the Great Ethical Question (how to live a good life) are, neither of them, static, but dynamic. Dynamic problems, more so than other kinds of problems, are mastered through procedural skill much more than through propositional knowledge. The set of procedural skills predicated of the phronimos, therefore, is indispensable to the account of what her expertise consists in.

Third, the phronimos is someone whose goodness/excellence runs much deeper than her intellect. It goes all the way down, so to speak, into her moral character. Aristotle frames this in two ways. At EN 6.13 1144b30–32, he tells us that a person cannot be practically wise without also having character virtue and, vice versa, cannot have character virtue without practical wisdom. The mutual complementariness of these excellences is embedded in and consequent upon both (i) the way Aristotle construes the decision procedure of ethical reasoning and (ii) his conception of “right reason” as being integrated with character virtue. For (i), we see from the outline of the progression from wishing through deliberation to choice that Aristotle imagines ethical reasoning as proceeding—in normal circumstances—according to a standardized procedure. When we get to Book 6, we learn that “character virtue gets
the goal right [the object of wishing], and practical wisdom the means to the goal [the object of choice]” (EN 6.12 1144a7–9). Thus, in order to succeed in the decision procedure—which is not merely a matter of progressing through all the steps, but really getting things right at each stage—both character virtue and practical wisdom are necessary. And for (ii), Aristotle is quite emphatic that “[character virtue] is not merely a state in accordance with right reason (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), but a state that is with right reason (μετὰ τοῦ ὀρθοῦ λόγου)” (6.13 1144b26–27)—a point that ought to be clear enough from his assertion that virtuous acts may be performed virtuously only if they are performed by a person knowingly (εἰδως; 2.4 1105a31). But the point has proven controversial nonetheless. In any case, the phronimos is someone who depends on her good character virtue in addition to her intellectual virtue for navigating and excelling in the ethical world.

The other way in which Aristotle attaches good moral character to practical wisdom is in his assessment of what a person needs before embarking on the journey of acquiring practical wisdom.

[T5] A person listening adequately to lectures about fine and just things and generally about political matters, must have been brought up finely in her habits (τοῖς ἐθεσιν ἧχθαι καλῶς). For the starting point (ἀρχὴ) is the fact (τὸ ὁτι), and if this is clear enough then there is no need of the why (διότι). And the person brought up finely is such a sort as to have or easily get the starting points. (EN 1.4 1095b4–8)

Neverminding the epistemological point here about the separateness in acquisition and function of “the fact” and “the why,” insofar as a “fine upbringing” is an essential prerequisite to engaging in ethical learning of the intellectual sort, character virtue complements practical wisdom not only in the decision procedure, but also in education. Assuming that

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* See Lorenz (2009) for what I take to be the decisive discussion of this issue: “It seems to me repellent for a theory of virtue to deny that having an outstandingly good character in important part actually consists in being disposed to grasp such reasons in a way that rests on a suitable understanding of human affairs, and instead to insist that character-virtue consists exclusively in dispositions to experience certain feelings on appropriate occasions, allowing only that establishing and maintaining character-virtue for some reason or other requires also establishing and maintaining, as a distinct condition of the mind, an understanding of relevant matters of values and a corresponding openness to suitable reasons for acting in certain ways” (178).

* The epistemological point I am having to push to one side here is an important one, but one we cannot dwell upon here. It is worth noting, however, that while it might seem to many of us an obvious feature of Aristotle’s theory of ethics that having knowledge of which action is to prakton consists in grasping why that action is to prakton, nonetheless there are some scholars who deny that grasping reasons
Aristotle believes this “fine upbringing”—described using the exact same word he uses in describing the process of habituation, “ἐθίζεσθαι,” (2.1 1103b24)—to be not merely one of many ways to acquire the starting points of ethical education, but precisely the way, then a phronimos is someone who was on the way to becoming good (long) before they began really thinking about these matters. This is not a claim about determinism or fate, but a claim about the personal history of anyone who becomes a phronimos. As will be spelled out more fully a bit further on this paper, this means that the phronimos is someone who has priors—literally, intuitions and beliefs that are acquired during the process of growing up and making sense of the world and that influence the cognitive activities of the person whose psychic states they are.

V. Room for Disagreement

Given the profile of phronesis sketched above, a way emerges for phronimoi to find themselves disagreeing about what action is to prakton in a given situation. Due to the metaphysical status of the ethical domain as highly particularized, contingent and variable, the knowledge possessed by a phronimos will be similarly particular and variable, in just the same way that a scientist’s knowledge is universal and true of necessity as a reflection of the metaphysical status of scientific domains. For many Aristotle scholars, notice of this feature of phronesis has inspired the thought that Aristotle is a particularist about ethical knowledge, as opposed to being a generalist, and that the nearest he comes to general moral principles—which would be elements of ethical knowledge—are “V-rules,” to use Rosalind Hursthouse’s turn of

why is really important at all for having ethical knowledge. For example, McDowell (1979) claims that “nothing over and above the unclouded deliverances of the sensitivity is needed to explain the actions which manifest virtue. It is not that some extra explanatory factor, over and above the deliverances of the sensitivity conspires with them to elicit action from the virtuous person…” (334). It is difficult to state just far this gets Aristotle wrong. But John Cooper (1975) does better to make sense of the idea that we do not expect moral experts to engage in explicit, drawn out deliberation in advance of every action they perform. Rather, we expect them to understand why the actions they perform are ta prakta. Cooper puts it this way: “If [the virtuous person’s] commitment involves knowing what he is doing and why he is doing it, he must be able, to some considerable degree, to explain and even justify himself (since, on Aristotle’s view, virtue entails “practical wisdom” and this entails knowing what conduces to a good life” (9). This is a far better representation of Aristotle’s view than McDowell’s.

Aristotle makes a brief observation following his exposition of the ergon argument that “of first principles (archai) some are seen through induction, some through perception, some through a certain habituation, and others in other ways” (1.7 1098b3–4). This implies, but perhaps not definitively, that Aristotle imagines a strict correspondence between certain archai and the means by which they are acquired, carrying us to the conclusion that the archai of ethical education, once specified as being acquired through habituation, can be acquired in no other way.
phrase. Perhaps this is correct, but I want to propose something else entirely.

The contingency of the ethical domain forces variability into the body of knowledge that Aristotle calls *phronesis*, to be sure. But we must note that the contingency lies only in *future* actions, not in past ones. There was a time, before every action *A* of the past, during which *A* might have been otherwise, but for every *A*, after *A* has occurred, it is no longer the case that *A* can be otherwise. This is evidently Aristotle's conception of the contingency of events when he says:

[T6] It is impossible for anything that has already happened to be an object of choice, for example, no one chooses to have sacked Troy. For no one deliberates about what has already happened, but about what is going to happen and is capable of being otherwise, and what has already happened is not capable of not having happened. This is why Agathon is right to say

For God is lacking in this alone,
To make not to have happened those things that have
been done. (EN 6.2 1139b5–11)

This asymmetry between the past and the present is relevant only to those who are engaging in deliberation. Scientists need not worry about this problem because, simply put, their objects of concern are not variable. It is built into the concept of an essence that it is invariable, and essences are the concern of scientists. But moral agents are tasked with navigating a world that is determined more by choice, luck, and material variation (literally, variation from the form caused by interference of matter) than by essences. This is why Aristotle grounds ethical knowledge in a first principle about human nature (that human beings are rational animals, 1.7) but then warns us, repeatedly and adamantly, that the first principles of ethics should be treated as variable and true only for the most part (EN 1.7 1098a26–31; 6.5 1140a33–1140b4). From top to bottom, the ethical domain is variable, but across time there is nevertheless this asymmetry between past and future: the past is determinate and the future is contingent.

It is clear that the asymmetry outlined above is why Aristotle insists so frequently upon experience (*empeiras*) being part of the *phronimos*' portfolio. Unlike the student of geometry who will be quite capable, in the future, of identifying triangles and bisecting angles based on only a handful of introductions—perhaps only a single

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* Hursthouse (1999).
* The importance of experience is emphasized by Aristotle at 2.1 1103a15–17; 3.8 1116b3ff.; 6.7 1141b14–21; 6.8 1142a11–15; 6.11 1143b7–14; 10.9 1181a11–12.
introduction—to these concepts in the past, the student of ethics is likely to be confounded at moments in trying to trace the similarities between past instances of, say, generous action and future instances. A lifetime of experience in observing ethical phenomena really does improve a person’s ability to identify the ethical phenomenon they see next. The more experience, the better.

The phronimos is not a student of ethics, however. She is a fully grown, mature moral expert, and experience has even more bite for the expert than merely this contribution to the skill of identifying instances of moral kinds. For her, familiarity with the past ethical landscape informs her understanding of how to behave and influence the future ethical landscape. What she has gleaned from the past is not only what shape ethical actions take, but also (i) what their consequences are and (ii) what sorts of facts stand as reasons to perform them and (iii) what likelihood there is that such facts obtain from situation to situation. The phronimos’ real power as a moral agent is in harnessing this understanding of the past to master the future. The asymmetry of past to future in the ethical domain is precisely what makes this power possible. Because the past is determinate, the phronimos has a firm ground upon which to form estimates about the future. She is still working with probabilities and indeterminate facts, but her familiarity with what is true “for the most part” gives her an edge.

The De Interpretatione discussion of future contingency helps to secure this view as central to Aristotle’s metaphysics.

[T7] We see that the first principle (archē) of future things comes from both deliberation and action, and that, generally, among those things which are not always actual there is potential to be and not to be, similarly. For such things, both being and not being are capable of coming about, with the result that either coming to be or not coming to be may occur. There are many obvious instances

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5 When Aristotle says that “a young boy may become a mathematician […] because mathematical entities are acquired through abstraction,” I take it that he has in mind what I have suggested, that mathematical science is concerned with forms or essences alone, which are themselves abstracted away from matter (6.8 17–18). But I might introduce some difficulty with this characterization, too, since this passage in full states the following: “a young boy may become a mathematician, but not a philosopher or a physicist because mathematical entities are acquired through abstraction while the first principles of the latter are acquired through experience” (6.8 17–19). It is a mistake to think that what is true about the mathematician’s ability to acquire concepts is generalizable to all sciences, and some sciences, evidently, require experience every bit as much as practical wisdom does. But the role of experience might not be the same for the scientist as it is for the practically wise person, and while it is unsatisfactory to leave this discussion aside for now, I must do so with only the recommendation that what I say in the remainder of this paper might be considered part of an answer to what the difference might be in that application of experience.
of this, for example that it is possible that this coat may be cut in half, and yet it may not be cut in half, but wear out first. In the same way, it is possible that it should not be cut in half; unless this were so, it would not be possible that it should wear out first. So it is therefore with all other events which possess this kind of potentiality. It is therefore plain that it is not of necessity that everything is or takes place; but in some instances there are real alternatives, in which case the affirmation is no more true and no more false than the denial; while some exhibit a predisposition and general tendency in one direction or the other, and yet can issue in the opposite direction by exception. (De Interp. 1.9 19a5–23)

The example of cutting the coat in half or not cutting the coat in half illustrates his point that human action (and deliberation, which ordinarily precedes and determinate action) makes things possible, increases and decreases the probability of further events, and functions as a genuine cause (of the explanatory, first principle kind) of various phenomena. In the ethical domain, the subject-matter of which just is human action, the causal role of deliberation, action, and choice is particularly pronounced. This means that a phronimos, who is an excellent deliberator, consistent in acting according to her choices, and a diligent planner, is likely to harness this causal power in such a way as to realize her goals.

But the phronimos, even in her years of experience and her greatly advanced skills of deliberation and planning, will never be able to make the future determinate. The fact remains that she will, in every instance of deliberation, have to assign probabilities to the likelihood of different scenarios attaining in the future. She does better than a wild guess, as we have already noted, but because of the volatility of the highly particularized and variable ethical domain, she is unlikely to assign a probability of 1 to any future event—unless she is over-sure of herself, which she cannot be without doing violence to the very conception of phronesis.

It is against a background of assumptions about what the future will be like that a phronimos deliberates about what action to choose,

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* Aristotle makes the same point at EN 3.3 1112a30–: “We deliberate about things that are up to us (ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν) and to be done (ποιεῖτων). And these are what remains. For nature and necessity and luck appear to be causes, but also intellect (νοῦς) and everything done through human beings (πᾶν τὸ δι᾽ ἄνθρωπον).”

* Drawing on the variability of facts in the ethical domain, a degree of epistemic humility must be built into the concept of ethical expertise. The phronimos is confident, but confidence does not a blind refusal that things may turn out otherwise. In the ethical domain, in particular, this recognition is surely a mark of the phronimos.
having assigned probabilities to those future circumstances somewhere less than 1 and greater than 0. I propose that two different phronimoi might assign different probabilities to future circumstances and, on account of these different conceptions of what the future holds, reach different conclusions in their deliberation.

VI. Reasoning about the Future

The future, for every human being, presents an opportunity for pursuing our species-wide end of flourishing. At least, that is Aristotle’s story anyway. Of course, he would say that it is life that presents this opportunity, but life stretches into the future, so any planning and negotiating and positioning in life is necessarily a matter of projecting into the future. This is what the phronimos does, and in an excellent way.

Living a good life entails a degree of forethought. To use an example: If we imagine our flourishing as consisting, in part, in being able to provide a meaningful and valuable education for our children, then we must have a mind to a few things that could ensure the realization of that goal or else preclude its possibility. For one thing, we should have some estimation of how many children we will need to provide for in this way. It makes a difference to our planning whether that number be one or five. And it makes a further difference whether that estimation matches what actually plays out in the future. Planning for four children and facing the misfortune—against my wishes—of having zero would very much thwart my plans and render some of my planning moot. The difficulty is, of course, that the future is unknowable, only estimable according to expectations of what usually is the case. The best I, or we, or even a phronimos, can do in the face of such unknowables is to make the most educated estimations possible, according to our respective abilities for doing so.

The phronimos, in her skill for living life, a skill which necessarily involves planning and attempting to harness an unknown future, is quite advanced in her ability to estimate the probability of future circumstances, factoring in the increased probability lent by her own future actions. This must be something which sets her apart from ordinary moral agents since otherwise she would have a talent only for designing or imagining what a good life looks like rather than a talent for actually living such a life. But if the phronimos is uniquely strong in her capacity for estimating the probability of future events, what is it in her background or education or cognitive abilities or perspective that gives her this strength? How did the phronimos develop this skill and what grounds it?

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* Since, as [T7] reveals, human deliberation and action are efficacious in determining to some extent what the future will look like, the phronimos will figure her own actions into her estimations, and to what extent it is possible, the actions of others.
As alluded to already in this paper, the *phronimos* arrives at a stable and robust ability to estimate the probability of future events through her exposure to very many events throughout her life. I have proposed that this is—a—if not *the*—significant contribution of experience (*empeiras*). Akin to the story of knowledge acquisition that we see in *Metaphysics* A.1 and *Posterior Analytics* 2.19, the story of how experience contributes to ethical knowledge is that a *phronimos* forms her conception of what is true in the ethical domain through exposure to many ethical phenomena—just as the scientist arrives at her conception of true scientific propositions through exposure to many biological or geometrical phenomena. The *phronimos* gathers up her memories that stretch across many phenomena and she discovers, through a comparison of them, what is generally common to all. Of course, the scientist discovers something *universally* common when performing this task, but the *phronimos* discovers something only *generically* common, or common “for the most part.” Ultimately, the *phronimos* will end up with a handful of propositions which generically capture and describe the ethical domain. What she has is a grasp on what is true for the most part regarding human life and activities, and more to the point, what is true for the most part regarding what is good and bad for human beings.

This conception of what is true for the most part about human action is the springboard from which the *phronimos* makes her estimations of the probability of future events. She is able to predict the future only according to what she thinks is likely to happen, and what she thinks is likely to happen is grounded in these many propositions which capture what she knows to be true for the most part. She might be entirely ill-equipped to predict the precise ways in which events will depart from what is usually true, or perhaps her familiarity with an extended range of examples will enable her to make an educated estimation even of those variations. But in any case, it is her exposure to an extensive range of particular phenomena and her grasping of what is generically true that grounds her skill in judging what the future holds. She sets her future life plans according to what she has learned from the past.

Now, my reader might suppose at this point that I have attributed undue weight to this skill in estimating the probability of future events. One might think that *phronesis* is a kind of expertise applicable to present and near-future ethical situations rather than the distant-future situations that would involve complex calculations of probabilities across several different contributing factors. After all, Aristotle defines *phronesis* as “a state [of the soul] with a true account and capable of action that is concerned with things good and bad for human beings” (6.5 1140b20–21). This definition, at least *prima facie*, does not include any

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21 See Devin Henry’s “Holding for the Most Part: The Demonstrability of Moral Facts” (2015) for a thorough survey of the varieties of ways in which facts are true “for the most part.”
reference to distant-future scenarios. It is, in fact, consistent with a McDowellian-style conception of moral expertise that concentrates all of the relevant expertise into a skill of appreciating salient information through perception, implying that what is ethically salient is what is present to be perceived and that what is not present to be perceived is not ethically salient.\textsuperscript{22}

The McDowellian account is an overly modest assessment of how much work Aristotle imagines phronesis to enable us to do well. For one thing, phronesis must enable us to achieve eudaimonia. Without enabling us to do that, phronesis could scarcely be defined as “concerned with things good and bad for human beings,” since eudaimonia is not only the chief and final good but also the cause and explanation of all other goods.\textsuperscript{23} But if Aristotle does conceive of phronesis as being concerned with that highest and most final of human goods, then he is committed to the view that phronesis is concerned with the distant-future every bit as much, if not more, as the near-future. For the concern with eudaimonia is a concern with what it is for a human life, as a whole, to go well and for the person living such a life to be happy, a goal that is realized across decades, not days. To deny that phronesis does this is to deny that it is an excellence in living life and to assert, instead, that it is in an excellence in navigating short-term, fixed problems.

Also, we must keep in mind that Aristotle thinks we can understand phronesis best by considering those who have it, at which point he directs our attention to the fine deliberator. As soon as we follow up on what fine deliberation consists in, we realize the extent to which the phronimos’ work concerns problems that involve myriad steps, arresting doubt, and sometimes even the devastation of confronting impossibility. From EN 3.3 where Aristotle provides a survey of the activity of deliberation in the course of explaining his three stage decision procedure (wishing-deliberating-choosing):

\begin{quote}
\textbf{[T8]} [Deliberators] assume the end and then work out how and by what means it is to be attained; and if it seems that it might come about through several means, they consider by which it is most easily and best produced, while if it is achieved by one only they consider how it will be achieved by this and by what means this will be achieved, till they
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Though, admittedly, Aristotle does seem to license a rather broad construal of perception, particularly with regards to ethical perception both when he says that the good “appears” to the good person (3.4 1113a30–31) and that the perception involved in phronesis is “not perception of qualities peculiar to one sense but a perception akin to that by which we perceive that the particular figure before us is a triangle” (6.8 1142a27–29).

\textsuperscript{23} “Eudaimonia is among things honorable and perfect. For it is on account of this that everyone does all the other things they do, and the first principle (ἀρχὴν) and the cause (ἀίτιον) of good things (ἀγαθῶν) is, we posit, something honorable and divine” (EN 1102a1–4).
come to the first cause, which in the order of discovery is last. For the deliberator seems to investigate and to evaluate in the way described as though he were evaluating a geometrical construction (not all investigation is deliberation, for instance mathematical investigations, but all deliberation is investigation), and what is last in evaluation seems to be first in coming to be. And if we happen upon an impossibility, we give up the search, for example if we need money and this cannot be got; but if a thing appears possible we try to do it. What I mean by “possible” are things that might be brought about by our own efforts; and these in a sense include things that can be brought about by the efforts of our friends, since the moving principle is in ourselves. The subject of investigation is sometimes the instruments; sometimes the use of them; and similarly in the other cases, sometimes the means, sometimes the mode of using it or the means of bringing it about. (EN 3.3 1112b15–31)

This depiction conveys that deliberation just is a process of working out strategies for how to achieve complex goals in indeterminate circumstances. If Aristotle imagined ethical expertise to be applicable only to short-term goals or immediate circumstances, then he could not have also thought that ethical expertise is what enables us to reason well about complicated and extended successions of means and ends, sometimes surprising us with impossibilities and always involving some degree of doubt about the facts. I contend, then, that we should think of distant-future-oriented deliberation as being characteristic of the phronimos and of phronesis as being foremost an excellence in working out these problems that are central to living a whole life well.

If this story is so far correct, then there is an absolutely vital feature of Aristotle’s theory of practical wisdom that we cannot pass over in silence and that, I think, provides us with an answer to the question of whether or not rational disagreement is possible for two phronimoi. The remainder of this section will unfurl that vital feature.

If exposure to particulars is the way of acquiring the skill for estimating the probability of future events, and human action is highly particularized and variable, then each new exposure to a particular action will contribute to the phronimos’ understanding. That is, her knowledge is continuously being updated throughout her life with every new exposure. No doubt, she will not radically revise her understanding at every new exposure. Her knowledge is never razed to the ground and rebuilt from scratch, but her confidence level might shift as the body of phenomena to which she is exposed grows and she will no doubt revise some of those propositions which she knows are true for the most part. To put this simply, her sample size expands as she advances through her life, and sample size really does matter with a data
set that is as highly volatile as the ethical domain. What she grasps by way of generic truths when she is midway through her life might be different from what she grasps late in life. This is not to deny her middle-aged expertise, but it does make meaningful Aristotle’s reverence for the role of time and experience in expert living. Older really does equate with wiser, when comparing two phronimoi anyway.

Accordingly, an older phronimos will be better at planning—despite having fewer remaining years for which to plan—because she will have greater mastery of the ability to estimate probabilities of future events and no doubt a better ability to factor in the contributions made by her own future actions. Against this background, it is quite easy to see how two phronimoi might disagree: one chooses action A based on her estimations; the other chooses B or is outright averse to A based on her, different, estimations. Neither phronimos makes a mistake in her estimation or deliberation, though. The difference in their choices is permissible. Hence, a difference of choice between two phronimoi, or between a middle-aged phronimos and her older phronimos self, would amount to rational disagreement. But this is not actually decisive of the question of this paper since it is reasonable to believe that the young phronimos and the old phronimos, though both moral experts, are not quite epistemic peers in the way we specified from the beginning.

Still, the difference between the middle-aged and the older phronimo with respect to the size of the sample from which they make estimates about the future while deliberating, highlights a difference to be found even between two phronimoi whose samples are of the same size: the necessary variation between those two sample sets. Because ethical understanding is acquired in life, not in the classroom, and because no two people on this earth live sufficiently similar lives to have the same sample of phenomena from which to draw out generic propositions, every phronimos will have her knowledge grounded in a sample set that is, of necessity, different from the sample set of the next phronimos. So whereas we might judge the difference between a middle-aged phronimos and her older phronimos self as being a difference in degree of expertise measured by the extent of their experience in living life thus far, we can judge the difference between two phronimoi of similar age and experience also by their samples. In this instance, it is the content of the sample set, not its size, that marks the difference.

A person’s past sets their expectations for the future. That much is clear. This is what is involved in describing someone as having priors. Literally, their expectations for the future (where expectations might be bare estimations of what the future holds or even their hopes and dreams for what the future may bear) are shaped by their experience prior to the present. A phronimos is someone whose priors are set in accordance with what is true for the most part in the moral domain, but it is feasible that two phronimoi might have distinct priors based on having distinct life experience. They each generically grasp what is true for the most part—else they would not be phronimoi—but here is the rub:
they will grasp what is true for the most part within their sample set, and the gap between sample sets may be more or less significant. It is hard to estimate the extent of the gap, given the highly particularized and variable nature of the ethical domain. Surely there will be a greater gap between phronimoi living in, say, India and Canada than between two living together in Athens, but it is feasible that some gap would stand between even the Athenian phronimoi. Differences in social interactions, dinner etiquette, dress for occasion and weather, decorum with regard to humor, etc., will all contribute different styles of living and different conceptions of what is true for the most part both about facts of human action and what is good and bad for human beings.

Now, we may expect some degree of disagreement between an Indian phronimos and a Canadian phronimos, since phronesis is already conceived as being expertise in living a socially embedded life, inclusive of all the peculiarities of the society in which the phronimos is living. Where there are gaps in the customs of societies, gaps between moral experts in those societies might easily follow. That disagreement comes for free. Of course, It should be noted as an answer to the question of this paper, but it is perhaps not formulated in a way that lends insight into Aristotle’s theory. It is the possibility of disagreement between two phronimoi living in a single society that concerns us here.

We know already, from our snapshot of phronesis, that getting things right, i.e. grasping truth, and in depth moral conditioning across both non-rational and rational dimensions of the soul are integral to Aristotle’s conception of the phronimos. These features come to life when we consider them, as we have done here in this section, in conjunction with the phronimos’ task of reasoning about the future. Viewed from this angle it is easy to see that the grasp on truth and the moral conditioning fill out the background conditions and the expectation-setting that are prerequisite to the phronimos excelling in their procedural work of perception, setting goals, and reasoning about means to ends. The procedural skills, thus, emerge as the most distinctive element of the phronimos’ profile. Well and truly, the procedural skills eclipse the truth-grasping and the moral conditioning as more significant and indicative of phronesis. This is why Aristotle explicitly identifies the procedural work as the ergon of the phronimos:

[T9] Practical wisdom is concerned with human matters and with things about which it is possible to deliberate. For we say that this is most of all the work (ergon) of the phronimos: to deliberate well (eu). [...] The unqualified good deliberator (euboulos) is he who is capable of aiming in accordance with calculation at what is best for a human being among the things to be done (tōn praktōn). (6.7 1141b8–14)
The reasoning capacities dominate the account of what makes the phronimos, well, a phronimos. What this tells us is that phronimoi are similar primarily through their matched skill in such procedures. They are similarly good at deliberating; they are not necessarily similarly saddled with the same set of priors. They each have a grasp on what is true for the most part, but this leaves room for some difference in what each of them takes to be true for the most part. They each have been morally conditioned, but this was necessarily carried out through exposure to different sets of particular phenomena.

Given the differences in their backgrounds, however wide or minute those differences might be, we should actually expect two phronimoi to assign different probabilities to future events. Together with their sensitivity to particular details of situations and how those details count as reasons for or against choosing particular actions, there is a significant chance they the differences in their priors will amount to differences in what actions they judge to be to prakton.

But it seems to me that the variety of disagreement that they might find themselves in would have to be restricted to Weak Disagreement—in which one phronimos chooses p and another chooses q, but each recognizes the choice of the other as permissible or, at a minimum, does not believe not-q or not-p, respectively. Aristotle's epistemology would have to limit reasonable disagreement to this variety because, it seems to me, the condition of phronesis being "truth-grasping" and being a state by which the soul truths, is a condition that could not accommodate Strong Disagreement.

According to Strong Disagreement, we remember, one phronimos believes that the prakton action is (p and not-q) and the other believes the inverse. Such disagreement would entail that the phronimoi have contradictory beliefs, and this would problematize their mutual recognition of one another as epistemic peers. In fact, in any scenario we can imagine in which two phronimoi disagree, it must be the case that upon realizing the difference in their beliefs about what is prakton, their own practical wisdom will call upon them to recognize the other’s belief as warranted and permissible. Thus, if ever they did believe (p and not-q) and (q and not-p), respectively, they would give up the second conjuncts of their beliefs upon seeing that their epistemic peer held the contradictory position.

Quite aside from asserting Weak Disagreement by way of ruling out Strong Disagreement, Aristotle’s theory is more fully sensible when we recognize that Weak Disagreement is possible between phronimoi. He says at EN 3.3 that “we call upon people to deliberate together with us in the face of great questions, distrusting ourselves as not equal to deciding” (1112b10–11). This, along with what he has to say about the place of friends in the phronimos’ life, suggests that there is a great deal to be gained from seeking out epistemic peers with whom we (weakly) disagree. For ordinary moral reasoners (i.e. non-phronimoi), epistemic peers can help us put options on the table that we might have overlooked and take into account reasons that we either have not
considered or have not considered salient. But for *phronimoii*, joint deliberation with epistemic peers (other *phronimoii*) helps to open up much more. Each *phronimos* enters the deliberation with a wealth of understanding grounded in years of experience and a grasp on what is true for the most part in the domain of concern. Joint deliberation is likely to be an opportunity for updating their own beliefs and for expanding their experience vicariously.

Of course, this depiction of two disagreeing *phronimoii* learning from one another paints a picture of ultimate convergence, and I ultimate downplay the permissibility of their disagreement if I say that each of them grows and becomes better *qua phronimos* through this convergence. But, in fact, I think we should not leap to the assumption that what they gain from joint deliberation is borne from ultimate convergence. It seems to me that much of their moral maturity arises from their recognition of ethics as indeterminate and up to them and open to some variability in how best to achieve the end of happiness. And the interactions they have with their *phronimoii* peers with whom they disagree are the ripest for preserving that world view.

VII. Objections

1.

It might be objected that I have not considered the following successive claims:

(i) It is possible for two *phronimoii* to have the same understanding of what is true for the most part, just in case either they had the exact same set of experiences in the past (which is flatly implausible) or the generic propositions drawn out of each sample set of experiences is identical to the next (plausible).

(ii) Following on the idea that the generic propositions are the same regardless of sample set, this is possible only if the variability of the ethical domain is restricted to such a degree that the experiences of one person will be sufficiently comparable to the experiences of another that what is common to one set of experiences will be identical to what is common to another set, even though the sets of experiences themselves are not identical.

These claims, together, constitute a challenge to way in which I have depicted the metaphysical status of the ethical domain as being “highly particularized and variable.” The suggestion is that the variability is not so dramatic as I have made out, and that a domain with limited variability may be partitioned into small sample sets that could each be
described using a single set of generic propositions. If the ethical domain is such, then any given person’s experience set will be sufficiently like another other person’s such that generic descriptions will accurately describe every set.

I reject this limitation on the variability of the ethical domain for both philosophical reasons and on account of Aristotle exegesis. Philosophically, if we think that the Indian *phronimos* and the Canadian *phronimos* have widely enough different experiences to make disagreement between them pretty much inevitable, then we cannot be also committed to the idea that every set of experiences is sufficiently like the next to bear the same set of generic descriptors. And denying the differences between the experiences of the Indian and the Canadian is to deny the weight of social embeddedness in contributing to life experience (or else it is to deny that there are social differences between Indians and Canadians). These are denials that just cannot stand. Any reasonable conception of human life and the social embeddedness of human experience will have to grant the importance of differences in our social experiences.

Exegetically, Aristotle is quite clear that the variability of the ethical domain runs from the first principles straight through to the actions that count as *ta prakta* (6.1 1139a7; 6.4 1140a1). Again, from top to bottom, the ethical domain is variable. This is because formal causes are not as operative in the ethical domain as final causes, a consequence of—as we have seen—human deliberation and action being causally efficacious. Of course, Aristotle does conceive of the form of human beings—rational animal—as doing some explanatory work in grounding the correct conception of happiness (*EN* 1.7). But even the form of a human being is not properly an element of the ethical domain. What fills out the subject-matter of that domain are particular actions. It is from experience with particular actions that a person is expected to glean the intimate relationship between humans and rationality anyway. We see this from the way that Aristotle hand waves about the rigor of his *ergon* argument (1.7 11098a20–22) and points to ordinary observations of the difference between grass, cows, and human beings in order to convince us of his point that human beings need to live a rational life (*EN* 1.7 1097b38–1098a4). It is telling, I think, that he does not make this point by engaging us in a scientific investigation of the sort we know him capable of doing. Instead he leaves formal essences out of it. This is because forms have no real place in ethics. It is the particular stuff that matters.

The real trouble with the particular stuff of the ethical domain is that it is made variable not merely by the inconstancy of matter (as is the case with biological entities), but also by the human capacity to choose. The variability of human desire coupled with the human capacity to effect change is, primarily, what determines the variability of the ethical domain. Sure, there are plausibly limits on the extent of this variability in light of limitations on the range of things humans might find
desirable, but it is certainly warranted for us—for me—to say of that variability that it is too extreme to be captured in a finite set of generic descriptors. Aristotle scholars have not appreciated that Aristotle conceives of the metaphysics of the ethical domain as being set up in this way.

Another objection runs as follows: Consider that Aristotle tells us that human beings are capable of expertise that enables them to assess what action counts as good and bad not only for themselves, but also for other people. This is the clear implication of the example provided in EN 2.6 of the physical trainer who prescribes different diets for the advanced wrestler Milo and a novice wrestler based on assessments of their height, weight, activity level, etc. Expertise in physical training is productive expertise, not ethical expertise, but Aristotle uses this example to draw out a feature of the moral domain because he thinks the two domains are sufficiently similar that the comparison is illuminating. What we can gather from the example is an expert in a domain involving deliberation is capable of deliberating on behalf of a third party—Milo and the amateur—and choosing an action on their behalf that will aid them in realizing their ends. But, my objector points out, if having expertise entails being able to give advice in this way, then two experts will be equally capable of giving out such advice, and this surely means that they will converge in their judgments. Any disagreement between them would mean that one is dealing out suboptimal advice and is, therefore, not an epistemic peer to the other. If they are epistemic peers, they must reach the same judgement.

This objection draws attention to what is the most important but most underappreciated aspect of Aristotle’s theory: the indeterminacy of much of the “evidence” in the phronimos’ given body of evidence. There is indeterminacy there because the future is indeterminate and yet the future is where many reasons (i.e. evidence) for and against particular actions lie. The phronimos must consult this future evidence in the form of probabilities. It is very likely that the consumption of a high protein, low fat meal like roasted chicken will result in increased health and strength, but this is dependent on many other variables and is true only for the most part even when other variables are controlled for. Add in the difficulty of specifying a precise amount of roasted chicken to consume, and the confidence interval widens. When the Uniqueness Thesis specifies that only one doxastic attitude is rational toward \( p \) in light of a given body of evidence, we cannot ignore that the body of evidence itself may not be certain.
We could, another objector might urge, hold fixed what is in the body of evidence and stipulate either that the evidence is certain or that our *phronimoi* have the same credence as one another with respect to each item of evidence in that body. I would be inclined to say that, according to this stipulation, Aristotle would be committed to the Uniqueness Thesis in ethical knowledge. Two people whose priors are perfectly matched (which, I take it, is measurable by the probabilities they assign to future events) and who are peers in their skill for assessing the salience of information and drawing conclusions, would converge in every judgment.

But this stipulation is one that violates Aristotle’s conception of the ethical domain, and it is my hope that this paper has illuminated at least that much.

**VIII. Conclusion**

I have argued that peer disagreement between Aristotle’s *phronimoi* is permissible. That is, it is rationally permissible for one *phronimos* to believe that action *p* is *to prakton* while another believes that action *q* is *to prakton*. I have made this argument through recognition of several features of Aristotle’s theory of ethical epistemology that are, I believe, too often overlooked: (i) that the past is asymmetrical to the future in its metaphysical status (the former being determinate while the latter is indeterminate), making the ethical domain itself asymmetrical, (ii) that the *phronimos*’ distinctive excellence in deliberation entails an excellence in predicting what will happen in the future (not a perfect ability, but an excellence grounded in understanding what is true for the most part about human activity), and (iii) the excellence in predicting or assigning probabilities to future events arises from her experience in life, in observing human activity, and this experience is sufficiently unique to her that her priors will differ from everyone else’s priors on account of their experience being private to them too.

One feature of Aristotle’s theory that I brought out early in this paper and would like to bring out again is this: the ethical question of how to live life well is not a problem to be solved, for Aristotle. It is a problem to be managed. At no point in anyone’s life—no, not even a *phronimos*—can that person be justified in announcing that they have figured out the whole problem, that they have arranged the system of life to run according to a solution they set out, and that they have resolved to passively follow the dictums of that solution. The indeterminacy of the future precludes the possibility of any such announcement being sensible. Life is an activity that constantly needs attention and fine-tuning, as well as a healthy dose of luck. What the *phronimos* knows most of all is that you cannot ever rest content that the job is done.


