

The Epistemology of Moral Belief in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

Dr. Bruno Niederbacher SJ
University of Innsbruck

Abstract: The aim of this article is to reconstruct roughly and in outline Aristotle's epistemology of moral belief from a contemporary point of view. First, I will make clear what the semantical presuppositions of an epistemology of moral beliefs are. Second, I will sort out kinds of epistemologies of moral belief. Third, I will try to reconstruct Aristotle's position as it is presented in the Nicomachean Ethics (EN), especially in book VI.

Key Terms: Cognitivism, Noncognitivism, Epistemic Justification, Foundationalism, Coherentism, Induction, Deduction, Internalism, Externalism, Emotion, Dianoetic Virtues, *Phronēsis*, Moral Virtues.

1. Clearing up the presuppositions

There is a fundamental division in contemporary ethical theory: the division between ethical cognitivism and noncognitivism. The divide concerns the semantic status of moral utterances. Somebody, let us call her Emma, might utter sentences like these:

- (i) One ought never to tell lies.
- (ii) It is morally wrong that the physician does not say the truth to Peter.

What does she do when she utters sentences like these? Some philosophers say that she is expressing an emotion towards the states of affairs in question.¹ Thus they would analyse (ii) as follows:

- (ii) The physician does not say the truth to Peter. Booh!

Other philosophers say that she is expressing an imperative. Thus they would analyse (i) as:

- (i) Don't lie!

A third group of philosophers claim that she is expressing pro/contra-attitudes, preferences, similar to wishes.² For them, (i) and (ii) can be analysed as:

- (i) Emma disapproves that there are lies on earth.
- (ii) Emma disapproves that the physician does not say the truth to Peter.

Whatever their other differences, these interpretations of moral utterances have one feature in common: they assert that moral utterances – despite their surface grammar – are not assertions bearing some propositional moral content. They do not, when sincerely uttered, express beliefs but rather some non truth-assessable mental states. All these interpretations fall under the heading “ethical noncognitivism”.

¹ Compare: Ayer, Alfred Jules. *Language, Truth and Logic*. London, 1936, p. 107.

² See for example: Scarano, Nico. *Moralische Überzeugungen. Grundlinien einer antirealistischen Theorie der Moral*. Paderborn, 2001, pp. 95-133.

Ethical cognitivism, on the other hand, contains the following theses:³

- (1) What Emma does by uttering (i) or (ii) is to assert or claim something. If she is sincere, she is thereby expressing her beliefs. Beliefs are attitudes toward propositions, whereby the propositions are held to be true. Propositions are truth-bearers, they are either true or false.
- (2) The propositions in question involve moral, that is, normative concepts. It is on this point that the difference between cognitivist and noncognitivist interpretations of moral utterances centres: even noncognitivists will say that utterance (ii) involves a proposition, namely *that the physician does not say the truth to Peter*. However, noncognitivists think that the normative concept of being morally wrong is not part of the proposition. Cognitivists, on the other hand, think that the concepts of being morally right or wrong, good or bad, are part of the proposition.
- (3) Some of these propositions with moral content are true. Thus cognitivists assume that there are facts which make these propositions true. Whether these facts are moral facts or natural facts or moral facts supervening on natural facts are further questions which have to be dealt with in moral ontology.⁴
- (4) People can be epistemically justified in believing, or even know, propositions with moral content.

If it were convincingly shown that noncognitivism is true, it would be idle to talk about the epistemology of moral beliefs, since there would be no moral beliefs, no propositions with moral content that could be true or false and that, as such, could be justifiably believed or known. However, in my view it has not been convincingly shown that noncognitivism is the right position. Here there will be not space to defend cognitivism. I will assume that it is a tenable position.

2. Sorting out epistemologies of moral belief

Given that there are moral beliefs: When do they have positive epistemic status? Or, to put it differently: Which conditions are necessary and sufficient that somebody is epistemically justified in believing propositions with moral content?

The justification in question is the *epistemic* justification of moral beliefs. Epistemic justification is to be confused neither with reasons for action, nor with instrumental justification of moral beliefs. Epistemic justification is a quality attributed to the grounds of beliefs, a quality which is truth-conducive: that which makes it probable that the proposition believed in is true.

It will be useful for my further procedure to distinguish between two types of propositional moral content and to introduce some abbreviations for it. Beside propositions with non moral content (p_{-m}) there are:

- propositions with universal moral content: p_{um} (example: One ought never to tell lies).
- propositions with singular moral content: p_{sm} (example: It is morally wrong that the physician does not say the truth to Peter).

³ Compare: Audi, Robert. *Knowledge and Ethical Character*. Oxford, 1997, p. 95.

⁴ For an extended treatment of moral realism see: Brink, David O. *Moral Realism and the Foundation of Ethics*. Cambridge, 1989; Schaber, Peter. *Moralischer Realismus*. München, 1997.

I am now in the position to develop a taxonomy of epistemologies of moral belief. One can sort them out by considering what answers they would entail concerning the following questions:

(1) Are the justifiers of beliefs always other beliefs or are there basic beliefs which are justified by something other than beliefs?

Epistemological coherentists would say: Justification is always doxastic, that is: beliefs are always justified by other beliefs.

Foundationalists on the other hand would say that there are two kinds of justification: doxastic and non doxastic. Some foundationalists would say that all basic beliefs are justified by being self-evident or incorrigible. We could call them rationalists.

Other foundationalists think that all basic beliefs are justified by being evident to the senses. What justifies a basic belief according to this view is a conscious state of having a perceptual impression. We could label this view empiricism.

Still other foundationalists hold a combination of the two positions claiming that: The belief that p is properly basic for S if and only if the belief that p is either self-evident for S or incorrigible (or indubitable) for S or evident to the senses for S . Some epistemologists call this position “classical foundationalism” (CF).

(2) If there are basic beliefs: Are among them beliefs with moral content or only beliefs with non-moral content? Some would say that the basic beliefs are only beliefs with non-moral content. And these justify the moral beliefs. For example: The belief of S that one ought not to lie is justified by the belief of S that lying minimises happiness on earth. It is hard to see how the latter belief, which is a belief with non-moral content, could be properly basic. Let us suppose that this belief is justified inductively by beliefs which are ultimately justified in the basic way. Nevertheless, this would not suffice to justify the moral belief. For the belief that

p_{um} One ought not to lie.

is justified by the belief with non moral content that

p_{-m} Lying minimizes happiness on earth.

only if one justifiably believes that

p_{um} An action ought not to be done if it minimizes happiness on earth.

What justifies this last belief? One is forced to think that there must be at least one basic belief with moral content. George E. Moore, for example, said:

It seems to me quite self-evident that it must always be our duty to do what will produce the best effects *upon the whole*, no matter how bad the effects upon ourselves may be and no matter how much good we ourselves may lose by it.⁵

⁵ Moore, George E. *Ethics*. New York-Toronto. 1912, p. 143. See also: Moore 1912, p. 112.

Thus, Moore assumes that there is one belief with universal moral content which is justified in the basic way: by being self-evident for him.

(3) If there are basic beliefs with moral content: Do they have universal moral content or singular moral content? Moore and many other philosophers would say that the basic beliefs are beliefs with universal moral content. Beliefs with singular moral content are derived and justified deductively from the basic beliefs. Let us label them moral deductivists.

Others would say that the basic moral beliefs are beliefs with singular moral content. And beliefs with universal moral content are derived and justified inductively from these basic beliefs. Let us call them moral inductivists.

Still others think that beliefs with universal moral content are justified abductively. The belief that one ought not to lie would for example be justified by the fact that this belief explains best the negative reaction of people who are confronted with occurrences of lying. Let us label the proponents of this position moral abductivists.⁶

(4) Is it necessary that the believer has direct cognitive access to the justifiers of beliefs or not? Roughly speaking: Epistemological internalists hold the position that what makes for the justification of a belief must be cognitively accessible to the believer by introspection. Epistemological externalists on the other hand think that it is not necessary that all the justifiers of a belief be cognitively accessible to the believer by introspection. According to some externalists beliefs are *prima facie* justified if they are the outcome of a reliable cognitive process or faculty/habit of belief formation.

3. Reconstructing Aristotle's position

3.1 Is Aristotle a cognitivist?

My answer is affirmative. Aristotle thinks that there are moral beliefs and that there is moral truth. In order to confirm this thesis I refer the reader to the following passages:

- In EN III, 6 Aristotle distinguishes between an object of will which appears to somebody as good and an object of will which is truly good. To the good person appear exactly those things as good which are truly good. Aristotle writes⁷:

For the good man judges each thing rightly, and in each particular [situation] appears to him what is true. [...] and perhaps what chiefly distinguishes the good man is that he sees the truth in each thing [...].” (1113a30)

The appearance is a cognitive mental state, in our terminology: a belief about what one should do in a particular situation.

⁶ The position that moral belief is abductively justified is outlined by Harman, Gilbert. *The Nature of Morality*. Oxford, 1977. For an analysis and criticism of this position see: Czaniera, Uwe. *Gibt es moralisches Wissen?* Paderborn 2001, pp. 138-143; and: McGrath, Sarah. “Moral Knowledge by Perception”, in: *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, 2004, pp. 209-215.

⁷ The following translations of Aristotle's texts are mostly taken from Irwin, Terence 1999. Sometimes the translations are my own.

- In EN VI, 2 Aristotle says that if the choice is to be good the reasoning must be true and the desire right. In this context he speaks of “practical truth” (1139a26-27).

- At the end of EN VI, 2 (1139b11-13) Aristotle says that the work (*ergon*) of both intellectual parts of the soul is truth: the work of the one part by which we grasp eternal, necessary and invariable things, and of the other part by which we grasp contingent and variable things.

- At the beginning of EN VI, 3 Aristotle says that there are five habits by which we get the truth. Among them he states clearly the dianoetic virtue of prudence (*phronesis*), an acquired intellectual capacity by which we discern what is right to do in a particular situation. And later Aristotle defines prudence as a true, deliberative habit concerning actions regarding those things which are good and bad for human beings (1140b5-7); as a true assumption (*alēthēs hypolēpsis*) about the end of action (1142b35).

This might be proof enough for my thesis that Aristotle’s position is cognitivist. However, scholars might raise two objections. The first objection is that “truth” is a word like “being” that can be predicated in more than one sense (*pollachōs legetai*); that “truth” in “practical truth” has a different meaning as “truth” in “theoretical truth”. And they might quote the following passage in their favour:

This is the practical thinking and the practical truth. In theoretical thinking, which is not concerned with action and production, the good and the bad way is truth and falsehood – for this is the work of every thinking part – in the practical thinking part [the good way is] the truth that is in agreement with right desire. (1139a26-30)

Some interpret this passage in the following way: Whereas the truth of theoretical statements consists in their agreement with reality, the truth of normative statements consists in their agreement with right desire. Franz Dirlmeier, for example, puts “truth” in the context of practical thinking into quotation marks and translates the last part of the passage thus:

In a thinking disposition, however, which aims at action, “truth” consists in agreement with right desire.⁸

This is a possible translation of the text. However, I think, that it is not the right translation. Aristotle does not say that practical truth consists in agreement with right desire. He says rather the following: While for habits of theoretical thinking the good state consists just in getting the truth, for the habit of practical thinking, namely prudence, the good state consists not just in getting the truth, but in getting the truth in agreement with right desire. Aristotle does not say that “truth” means something different here, but rather that the good state consists in something different, namely in the harmony between one’s true moral belief and one’s desire.

And G.E.M. Anscombe comments on this passage:

⁸ Here is the full passage in Dirlmeier’s German translation: „Bei der spekulativen Denkbewegung, die nicht auf ein Handeln und nicht auf ein Hervorbringen zielt, ist es anders: da bedeutet ‘gut’ und ‘schlecht’ einfach ‘wahr’ und ‘falsch’ – denn dies ist ja die Leistung alles spekulativen Verhaltens. Bei einem denkerischen Verhalten dagegen, welches auf Handeln zielt, liegt die ‚Wahrheit‘ in der Übereinstimmung mit dem richtigen Streben.“ See: *Aristoteles: Werke in deutscher Übersetzung. Ethica Nicomachea / Nikomachische Ethik*, translated by Franz Dirlmeier. Darmstadt, 1956, p. 123.

We now approach the great question: what does Aristotle mean by “practical truth”? He calls it the good working, or the work, of practical judgement; and practical judgement is judgement of the kind described, terminating in action. It is practical truth when the judgements involved in the formation of the ‘choice’ leading to the action are all true; but the practical truth is not the truth of those *judgements*. For it is clearly that ‘truth in agreement with right desire’ [...] which is spoken of as the good working [...], or the work [...] of practical intelligence. This is brought about – i.e. made true – by action [...].⁹

Anscombe does not deny that the propositions in the practical syllogism must be true. Nevertheless, she thinks that practical truth is not the truth of those propositions or of the conclusion from them. In my view, however, what Aristotle wants to say is neither that there are different concepts of truth involved nor that there are different types of truth-makers involved, i.e. actions, but rather that one has to have right desires in order to get the practical truth in the right way, and that the good – the virtuous – state consists in truth that is in agreement with right desire.

A second objection some scholars might raise against my thesis that Aristotle is a cognitivist concerns the structure of practical reasoning. They might say: Practical reasoning involves desires and beliefs. The structure is the following:

- (i) Emma desires end e.
- (ii) Emma believes that the end e is achieved by doing action a.
- (iii) S desires to do a.

Sure, the opponent will say, (ii) is a belief. However, it is a belief with no moral or normative content. It is rather a belief about means-end-connections that might be true or false.

My answer to this objection would be: Means-ends-reasoning is the way of reconstructing practical reasoning from the point of view of the will. But one can reconstruct it also from the point of view of cognition. Aristotle would say that a person wants to achieve an end because she grasps this end as a good. And this is a cognitive matter. One has beliefs about ends, and these beliefs can be true or false. Thus, Aristotle compares theoretical with practical reasoning and says:

For virtue preserves the principle, vice corrupts it, and in actions the end we act for is the principle, as the assumptions are the principles in mathematics. Reason does not teach the principles either in mathematics or in actions; it is virtue, either natural or habituated, that teaches correct opinion about the principle. (1151a15-19)

Aristotle speaks about the “correct opinion” (*to orthodoxein*). This is a belief towards a proposition. To grasp something as a good is to grasp it as something that ought to be pursued or done. Thus the form of a proposition with moral/normative content could be stated as follows:

One ought to pursue or do x in circumstances C.

⁹ Anscombe, G. Elisabeth M. *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe. Volume One. From Parmenides to Wittgenstein*. Oxford 1981, p. 77.

Two examples given by Aristotle might corroborate my interpretation. The first example is taken from *De Motu Animalium*:

For example, when you conceive that every man ought to walk and you yourself are a man, you immediately walk; or if you conceive that on a particular occasion no man ought to walk, and you yourself are a man, you immediately remain at rest. (701a13-15)

In this piece of practical reasoning three kinds of beliefs are involved:

- (i) beliefs with universal normative content: *In circumstances C every man ought/ought not to walk.*
- (ii) beliefs with singular non normative content: *I am a man and I am in circumstances C.*
- (iii) beliefs with singular normative content: *I ought/ought not to walk.*

Although Aristotle does not mention (iii) I think that it would appear in a complete reconstruction of the practical syllogism.

The second example is taken from book VII of the Nicomachean Ethics, where Aristotle deals with the problem of weakness of will (*akrasia*). By the way: In this context Aristotle speaks always of *knowledge* (*epistēmē*), clearly a cognitive state. The term knowledge is here not taken in the narrow sense of scientific knowledge, but in a wider sense. Now, the example is the following:

If for instance everything sweet ought to be tasted, and this, some one particular thing, is sweet, one necessarily will, if able and not prevented, immediately do this. (1147a29-31)

Again, there is the belief with universal normative content that everything sweet ought to be tasted, the belief with singular non-normative content that this particular thing is sweet, and the belief with singular normative content that this particular thing ought to be tasted. As in the first example, Aristotle does not mention this last belief, but I think that it would appear in a complete reconstruction of the practical syllogism.

My conclusion is that Aristotle can be seen as an ethical cognitivist. Now the question arises: Which kind of epistemology of moral belief does his theory involve? There is not much he says about this topic. I will try to reconstruct his epistemology with the help of a few quotations from the Nicomachean Ethics.

3.2 Is Aristotle a foundationalist?

Aristotle thinks that there must be starting- or stopping-points, principles (*archai*) in our reasoning. Starting-points are required in scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*). For science is the disposition of a person to proof something. Such proofs cannot go on forever. There are starting-points, beliefs with universal content that deductively justify other beliefs but which themselves are not justified deductively by other beliefs. Aristotle writes:

[...] deduction has principles from which it proceeds and which are not themselves [reached] by deduction. (1139b30-31)

The dianoetic virtue by which we grasp such principles is *nous*, which can be translated by understanding, insight, intuition:

[The states of the soul] by which we always grasp the truth and never make mistakes, about what can or cannot be otherwise, are scientific knowledge, prudence, wisdom, and understanding. But none of the first three – prudence, scientific knowledge, wisdom – is possible about principles. The remaining possibility, then, is that we have understanding about principles. (1141a6-9)

For understanding is of the first terms [*tōn horōn*] which cannot be proved [*ouk estin logos*]. (1142a26)

Such beliefs containing first principles – axioms, assumptions, real definitions – are starting-points of reasoning. The first of all principles according to Aristotle is the principle of noncontradiction.¹⁰

But starting points we need also in the other direction when it comes to the cognition of particulars. We cognise them by perception (*aisthēsis*):

Nor do we deliberate about particulars, about whether this is a loaf, for instance, or is cooked the right amount; for these are questions of perception, and if we keep on deliberating at each stage we shall go on without end. (1113a1-3)

Here with perception is not meant the perception of proper perceptibles (*idia aisthēta*), which is immune to error, but of accidental perceptibles (*kata symbebekos aisthēta*)¹¹ which are not only the product of sense perception but also of imagination (*phantasia*) and understanding (*nous*). Beliefs acquired by perception can be epistemologically foundational. But they are not incorrigible.

Now, what is the epistemological relation between beliefs with universal content and beliefs with singular content? This is a thorny question, and I will not be able to treat it here in a satisfying way. Aristotle thinks that perception belongs to the process of the formation of beliefs with universal content; furthermore belongs to that process induction (*epagōgē*) and experience (*empeiria*). We start with things that are cognitively familiar to us (*hēmin*) and proceed to things which are known without qualification (*haplōs*).¹² Aristotle says:

Hence deduction has principles from which it proceeds and which are not themselves [reached] by deduction. Hence they are [reached] by induction. (1139b30-32)

However, Aristotle would not say that the principles we finally reach are justified by the beliefs we started with. He would say that the principles are epistemically foundational. In other words: One has to distinguish between the acquisition and justification of beliefs. We acquire or learn the principles from particular situations, induction, experience. But they are not justified by these processes. These beliefs are foundational and they are properly so if they are the outcome of the dianoetic virtue of understanding (*nous*).

¹⁰ See: *Metaphysica* 1005b20-34.

¹¹ Compare: *De Anima* 418a20-24.

¹² Compare: EN 1095b2-4.

At first sight, Aristotle's position might seem to involve classical foundationalism (CF). CF involves the following thesis:

CF A person S is justified in believing that p, if and only if the belief that p is either properly basic for S, or inferentially justified by beliefs which are properly basic for S. The belief that p is properly basic for S if and only if the belief that p is either self-evident for S or incorrigible (or indubitable) for S or evident to the senses for S.

However, this position is hardly tenable, and that on several counts:¹³ First, CF is too restrictive. There are many everyday beliefs which we do not hold on the basis of other beliefs and which do not fulfil the conditions of proper basicity stated above but which we nevertheless take properly as basic, and which – if true – count as knowledge: e.g. my belief *I had breakfast this morning* or my belief *Emma is angry*. It follows that the conditions named in CF are not in fact necessary for a belief in order to be properly basic.

Second, who believes in CF seems by his own criteria not to be justified in believing it. For CF is neither self-evident, nor evident to the senses, nor incorrigible. Thus, CF is not basic for the believer of CF. Moreover, the believer of CF has not yet shown how to get CF inferentially. Thus, CF is not a justified belief at all.

Third, CF presupposes in the case of perceptual beliefs that there is a sharp distinction between a pure experiential ground as justifier on the one hand and the belief with propositional content on the other hand. However, it is questionable whether there are such pure experiences. Does not every experience involve conceptualisation and background-beliefs?

In my view, Aristotle's position does not involve CF. For he thinks that there are justified beliefs which do not fulfil the strong conditions stated in CF. Beliefs about accidental sensibles, for example, are justified in the basic way. But they are only *prima facie* justified. They can be subject to defeat. Aristotle is also not committed to the problematic view that perceptual beliefs are justified by grounds that do not involve conceptualisation or background-beliefs. This becomes clear by considering the important role of imagination (*phantasia*) in cognition. In my opinion, Aristotle is committed to a different type of foundationalism according to which beliefs can be properly basic if they are the outcome of cognitive faculties or habits that are working properly. I will say more to this in section 3.6.

3.3 Is Aristotle a moral foundationalist?

Some might think that Aristotle is committed to the view that basic beliefs do not have moral content. They might argue with the structure of practical reasoning outlined under 3.1:

- (i) Emma desires end e.
- (ii) Emma believes that the end e is achieved by doing action a.
- (iii) S desires to do a.

¹³ Compare: Plantinga, Alvin. "Reason and Belief in God", in: A. Plantinga & N. Wolterstorff (ed.). *Faith and Rationality*. Notre Dame 1983, pp. 59ff. Plantinga, Alvin. *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford 2000, pp. 93-99.

Thus, no moral belief would be involved in practical reasoning, but only desires and beliefs about means-end-connections.

However, as I said, desire of an end presupposes cognition of that end. To cognise something as an end is to cognise it as a good. And to cognise something as a good is to cognise it as something that ought to be done or pursued. Therefore, I would suggest that Aristotle is foundationalist in the moral area as well. But the question arises: Which beliefs are foundational: beliefs with universal moral content such as *Real goods ought to be pursued*, or *One ought to pursue happiness*, or *One ought to be virtuous*, or *One ought to be brave, modest, friendly, honest* or *One ought to act justly*, etc.? Or rather beliefs with singular moral content such as *I ought to say the truth to Peter now*?

3.4 Is Aristotle a moral deductivist?

Aristotle says that prudence (*phronēsis*) – the dianoetic virtue by which one cognises what one should do in a particular situation – involves two kinds of beliefs: universal and particular:

Nor is prudence about universals only. It must also acquire knowledge of particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars. (1141b15-17)

It is not sufficient for right moral action that one grasps the universal. Aristotle makes this clear when dealing with the problem of *akrasia*. One has to cognise the particular as well. On the other hand: One can do the right thing without knowing the universal. This would not be a virtuous action, but it would still be a right action. In order to act virtuously one has to cognise that what one is doing makes sense from the point of view of a fulfilled life: “It seems proper to a prudent person to be able to deliberate finely about things that are good and beneficial for himself, not about some restricted area – about what sorts of things promote health or strength, for instance – but about what sorts of things promote living well in general.” (1140a26-28)

The question is: Which belief is epistemologically prior? Let us take an example:¹⁴

- (i) One ought to be honest.
- (ii) Saying to Peter here and now “You are suffering from cancer” is being honest.
- (iii) I ought to say to Peter here and now: “You are suffering from cancer.”

¹⁴ Aristotle gives a different example: (i) Light meats are healthy. (ii) Poultry meats are light. (iii) Poultry meats are healthy. There are two problems with this example: First, it is not a moral example; second, premise (ii) is not about particulars. A moral example can be found in the *Posterior Analytics* (85b30-32) “Our search for the reason ceases, and we think that we know, when the coming to be or existence of the fact before us is not due to the coming to be or existence of some other fact, for the last step of a search thus conducted is *eo ipso* the end and limit of the problem. Thus: ‘Why did he come?’ ‘To get the money-wherewith to pay a debt-that he might thereby do what was right.’ When in this regress we can no longer find an efficient or final cause, we regard the last step of it as the end of the coming-or being or coming to be-and we regard ourselves as then only having full knowledge of the reason why he came.” The problem with this example is that it is not formulated in terms of beliefs but in terms of reasons for action. Therefore, I constructed an example of my own which I think fits with what Aristotle intends to say.

The deductivistic interpretation of Aristotle could be stated as follows: A person has got a set of beliefs with universal moral content. The acquisition and justification of these beliefs is to be seen in parallel to the acquisition and justification of beliefs in general, that is: The process of perception, experience and induction leads to the formation of beliefs with universal moral content. These beliefs are acquired by this process. However, they are not justified inferentially. They are justified by being the outcome of the dianoetic virtue of understanding. They have the epistemic status first principles have. They are foundational. Accordingly, the belief containing (i) is justified either in the basic way or inferentially from other beliefs with universal moral content.

The second or minor premise (ii) – a belief with singular content – is acquired by “perception”. We see that the principle has to be applied in the situation.

The deductivist interpretation seems to be adequate at first sight. However, reflecting on complex moral cases leads to second thoughts. Think of a situation where more than one principle could apply. There are at least three things we must find out: Not only do we have to find out (1) whether the conditions stated in the principle are fulfilled, that is, whether we find ourselves in the circumstances prescribed by the principle, and (2) what it means to be for example honest, brave, friendly, modest, etc., in the particular situation we find ourselves.¹⁵ We have also to find out (3) which among several moral principles is to be applied. And this cannot be found out by deduction. Obviously one must grasp this by “perception” as well.

What kind of perception is this? Aristotle writes:

Understanding is also concerned with the last things, and in both directions. For there is understanding, not a rational account [*ou logos*], both about the first terms and about the last. In demonstrations understanding is about the unchanging and first terms. In [the area] of action understanding is about the last term, the one that admits of being otherwise, and [hence] about the minor premise. For these last terms are beginnings of the [end] to be aimed at, since universals are reached from particulars. We must, therefore, have perception of these particulars, and this perception is understanding. (1143a36-1143b5)

It seems strange that Aristotle in this passage equates perception with understanding. I think there are two ways to understand this. First, Aristotle just wants to stress a parallel between the epistemic status of beliefs involving principles and beliefs with particular content, namely that both kinds of beliefs are epistemologically basic. As Aristotle puts it: There is no reason – *logos* – of them. Second, Aristotle wants to stress that the perception he is thinking of is not perception in the narrow sense. About this sort of perception he writes:

¹⁵ Compare: Taylor, Christopher C.W. „Aristoteles über den praktischen Intellekt“, in: T. Buchheim & H. Flashar & R.A.H. King (Hg.). *Kann man heute noch etwas anfangen mit Aristoteles?* Hamburg 2003, 142-162, p. 160: „[...] der Unerfahrene, der glaubt, dass Tapferkeit gut ist, und tapfer sein möchte, dem aber diese Einsicht darin fehlt, was Tapferkeit in dieser oder jener Situation erfordert, hat noch keine bestimmte Vorstellung davon, was Tapferkeit ist. Das Erlangen dieser bestimmten Vorstellung besteht nicht im Erlernen von Regeln oder Formeln; es besteht vielmehr in der Entwicklung eines Verhaltensstils, der Fähigkeit, flexibel und angemessen auf eine unendliche Vielfalt von Situationen reagieren zu können, wie die Erfahrung eines Meistersteuermanns.“ Also: Hughes, Gerard. *Aristotle on Ethics*. London – New York, 2001, p. 103: “The account I have just given strongly suggests that practical wisdom, in dealing with particular choices which have to be made, ‘reads’ situations in universal terms, and in so doing often refines our understanding of the sense of the universal itself.”

This is not the perception of special objects [*tōn idiōn*], but the sort by which we perceive that in mathematics the last [*eschaton*] is the triangle; for it will stop there too. This is rather perception than prudence, though it is a different kind of perception. (1142a25-31)

What kind of perception is it by which we grasp the minor premise? It is not the perception of the proper perceptibles. For the perception of these is ordered to the corresponding sense-capacity (colour to seeing, sound to listening, etc.). It is not perception of accidental perceptibles either, for they have the form: *The white is Peter*.¹⁶ Aristotle has a still wider sense of perception in mind. His example is taken from mathematics. There are two possible interpretations of this example:

- (a) perceiving *that this particular object is a triangle*.
- (b) perceiving *that in mathematics the last is the triangle*.

According to the interpretation (a) Aristotle is thinking of the kind of perception by which we grasp something as an instance of something general; the perception by which we grasp three lines as a triangle. It is an act of classification,¹⁷ in which perception and understanding are involved. In the moral area: Saying to Peter here and now “You are suffering from cancer” is an instance of being honest. This interpretation would be water on the mills of the deductivist.

According to the interpretation (b), however, Aristotle is rather thinking of the analysis of a complex geometrical figure whereby one comes to a last figure, the triangle. It is the simplest geometrical figure from which one starts to construct a complex geometrical figure. In the moral area: Saying to Peter here and now “You are suffering from cancer” is the last step in the process of deliberation and the first step in the process of action.¹⁸ The interpretation (b) might be correct as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough. It does not answer our question, namely how this first step is cognised.

One way to answer this question is to say: It is the kind of cognition by which we cognise axioms in geometry. Euclid formulates the axiom that two straight lines cannot enclose a space. What we grasp by drawing a particular triangle is the universal axiom that rectilinear figures must have at least three sides if they are to be figures in the traditional sense.¹⁹ This is a possible interpretation of how we cognise universals *via* particular situations. However, this interpretation does not tell us how we cognise the particular. That is the point Aristotle is dealing with.

Both interpretations make the epistemological point that the target belief is not inferentially justified but basic. But they do not tell us much about the sort of perception Aristotle might have been thinking of. In his commentary on the passage Thomas Aquinas says:

But this, i.e. prudence, is of the extreme, i.e. of the singular that can be done, which must be taken as the principle in the area of action. Of this extreme there is no scientific knowledge, because it is not demonstrated by reason, but sense,

¹⁶ Compare: *De Anima* 418a20-24.

¹⁷ Hughes, Gerard. *Aristotle on Ethics*. London – New York, 2001, p. 100.

¹⁸ This interpretation is supported by EN 1112b20-24. Compare: Wolf, Ursula. *Aristoteles' >Nikomachische Ethik<*. Darmstadt 2002, pp. 151-152.

¹⁹ Compare: Bostock, David. *Aristotle's Ethics*. Oxford, 2000, p. 101.

because it is perceived by a kind of sense: not by the kind of sense by which we perceive the species of the proper sensibles, for example colour, sound etc. which is proper sense, but by the inner sense, by which we perceive imaginable objects, such as in mathematics we cognise the extreme triangle, that is the singular imagined triangle, for even there, that is in mathematics, one will stop by some singular imaginable; as one will also stop in natural sciences by some singular sensible. And to this sense, that is the interior one, belongs rather prudence by which particular reason is perfected so that it estimates rightly about singular intentions of what to do. [...] And in this prudence is similar to the intellect: that it is concerned with an extreme.²⁰

Aquinas speaks of the inner sense: an awareness of the morally relevant features of one's action and the circumstances in which one is acting:²¹ when one ought, on what occasions, towards which people, from which purpose and in the manner one ought (1106b21-24). "Such things are among particulars, and the judgment depends on perception" (1109b24).

3.5 The role of emotions

The kind of perception Aristotle is talking about is also influenced by emotions and emotional patterns of response to situations. What seems right in a particular situation depends on the emotional state one is in. There is a passage which is part of an objection but which I think is nevertheless Aristotle's view. He says:

What if someone says that everyone aims at the apparent good, and that we do not have dominion over the appearance [*phantasia*], but on the contrary: the way somebody is, such the end appears [*phainetai*] to him. (1114b1-2)

The last sentence is important: The end will appear to each person according to the type of person they are. The belief what one should do under particular circumstances depends on the moral character of a person forming the belief. An inadequate emotional response can corrupt the view of the moral situation. This is not the case in other areas of belief formation, for example in mathematics:

For the sort of supposition that is corrupted and perverted by the pleasant or painful is not every sort – not, for instance, the supposition that the triangle does or does not have two right angles – but suppositions about what is achievable in action. For the principles of things achievable in action are their goal, but if someone is corrupted because of pleasure or pain, no [appropriate] principle can appear to him, and it cannot appear that this is the right goal and cause of all his choice and action; for vice corrupts the principle. And so prudence must be a state grasping the truth, involving reason, and concerned with action about human goods. (1140b14-22)

And later he writes:

²⁰ *In Ethicorum*, liber VI, lectio VII.

²¹ Compare: Kenny, Anthony. *The Aristotelian Ethics. A Study of the Relationship between the Eudemian and Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*. Oxford, 1978, p. 172.

Prudence is not cleverness, though it requires this capacity. This eye of the soul requires virtue in order to reach its fully developed state, as we have said and as is clear. For inferences about actions have a principle, ‘Since the end and the best good is this sort of thing’ (whatever it actually is – let it be any old thing for the sake of argument). And this [best good] is apparent only to the good person; for vice perverts us and produces false views about the principles of actions. Evidently, then, we cannot be prudent without being good. (1144a29-1144b1)

And finally the quotation we know already:

For virtue preserves the principle, vice corrupts it, and in actions the end we act for is the principle, as the assumptions are the principles in mathematics. Reason does not teach the principles either in mathematics or in actions; it is virtue, either natural or habituated, that teaches correct opinion about the principle. (1151a15-19)

The message is clear. But how are emotions or patterns of emotional response thought to influence the formation of moral beliefs? In my view, Aristotle thinks along the following lines: Our emotions follow the way we cognize the situation. This cognition however is not pure perception of proper sensibles, but perception in a wide sense which is influenced by imagination (*phantasia*). Imaginations trigger emotions. Emotions trigger imaginations. Thus the estimation of a situation depends on our emotional disposition.²² Fearful persons for example have the tendency to imagine too many difficulties. Overbold persons on the contrary have the tendency to imagine only the attractive features of the situation and not to register the dangerous ones. Because of their emotional patterns the two types of persons pick out different aspects of the situation and give them different weight. They come to different estimations of the situation. Thus they come to different opinions about what is the right thing to do in a given situation.²³

In order to get the right opinion one has to react emotionally adequately to the situation. Such appropriate emotional response is made possible by the moral virtues. The moral virtues are necessary in order to acquire beliefs with moral content that are true. These virtues have a cognitive function. This is one of the reasons for the claim that one cannot be prudent without having all the moral virtues.

3.6 Is Aristotle an epistemological internalist?

Many epistemologies, for example classical foundationalism (CF) and coherentism as well, involve epistemological internalism: the position that what justifies a belief must be cognitively accessible to the believer by introspection.

²² Compare: *De Insomniis* 460b3-11: “[...] and moreover that we are easily deceived about our perceptions when we are in emotional states, some in one state and others in another; e.g. the coward in his fear, the lover in his love; so that even from a very faint resemblance the coward thinks that he sees his enemy, and the lover his loved one; and in proportion to his excitement, his imagination is stimulated by a more remote resemblance. Similarly in fits of anger and in all forms of desire all are easily deceived, and the more easily, the more they are under the influence of emotion.”

²³ Compare: Niederbacher, Bruno. *Glaube als Tugend bei Thomas von Aquin. Erkenntnistheoretische und religionsphilosophische Interpretationen*. Stuttgart 2004, p. 138 and p. 162.

But this condition does not seem to be necessary for a belief in order to be justified. Take for example your belief *The person in front of me is my mother*. Do you have access to what justifies this belief? Could you tell what the justifiers are? Probably not. Nevertheless: You can be justified – still more – you can even know *The person in front of me is my mother*. You have learned the competence of person-identification in early childhood. Your belief is justified by the fact of being the outcome of this cognitive competence. Again, think of a wine connoisseur tasting some wine and forming the belief: *This wine has hints of oak and strawberries*.²⁴ This belief – I would suggest – is justified by being the outcome of his acquired competence.

Thus, it does not seem to be necessary that all the justifiers of a belief be cognitively accessible to the believer by introspection. Beliefs can be *prima facie* justified if they are the outcome of reliable cognitive processes or faculties/habits of belief formation. This is a moderate externalist view of epistemic justification.

Aristotle's epistemology does not seem to involve internalism. He is talking about a plurality of cognitive habits which, when functioning properly, lead reliably to the formation of true beliefs: understanding (*nous*), wisdom (*sophia*), scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*), skill (*technē*) or prudence (*phronēsis*). He calls such habits of belief formation dianoetic virtues. Some of them involve inferential reasoning; others do not. One has only to have these habits, one has not to know that one has them, in order to be justified in believing.

Some might object that Aristotle is an internalist, at least when it comes to moral epistemology. For he thinks that a person acts unqualifiedly good only if she knows why she acts as she acts. She must have reasons for action. These reasons can be stated in form of beliefs. And she has cognitive access to her beliefs. Therefore, one could conclude, Aristotle must be seen as internalist, at least in moral epistemology.

However, I think that this is not the proper description of epistemological internalism. Internalists do not claim that the beliefs viz. their content be accessible to the person, but rather that all the justifiers of beliefs be cognitively accessible to the person by introspection. Of course, the person having the moral virtues plus the dianoetic virtue of prudence acts out of true beliefs. But this does not mean that she has cognitive access to everything that grounds those beliefs epistemologically.

4. Conclusion

Beliefs about what one should do in a particular situation are justified by being the outcome of both the moral virtues and the cognitive virtue of prudence. One acquires these habits by long experience. They are not strictly rule-governed. They enable one to take into account a variety of grounds or inputs:

- doxastic: moral beliefs, background-beliefs
- non-doxastic: perceptions, sensations, imaginations, emotions, desires

²⁴ This example is taken from: McGrath, Sarah. "Moral Knowledge by Perception", in: *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, 2004, 209-228, p. 221.

These virtues enable one to form reliably true beliefs with singular moral content.²⁵ The virtuous person reacts in a way that is emotionally adequate to a particular situation, and is therefore in a position to be sensitive to the morally relevant aspects of the situation and to form a true belief of what has to be done in this situation.

²⁵ Compare: Adams, Robert M. *Finite and Infinite Goods. A Framework for Ethics*. Oxford 1999, p. 357. Alston, William. "The Distinctiveness of the Epistemology of Religious Belief", in: G. Brüntrup & R. Tacelli (ed.). *The Rationality of Theism*. Dordrecht 1999, 237-254, pp. 246-248.