Every ethical theory faces a practical dilemma. If it requires us to live very differently than we do, we are liable to dismiss it as unrealistic; but if it demands too little of us, we are liable to reject it for condoning dubious practices, if not for lapsing into psychologism. The problem is acute for eudaimonism, which seeks to reinforce commitment to ethical norms by showing how they contribute to happiness. Because it appeals to our native interest in living well, it seems better suited than many theories to win our allegiance. But in fact, many versions paint an ideal well beyond most people's reach, whereas any that demand much less risk sanctioning the flawed values and customs of their age. Already in antiquity, when eudaimonism flourished, the Stoics were widely criticized for setting standards too stringent to attain, while the Epicureans had to face charges of lowering our sights and encouraging tendencies that should rather be curbed. Or in general, the more happiness is supposed to resemble ordinary life, the less attractive it will seem, while the higher its ethical demands, the less attractive the steep path to it seems. To earn our approval, then, the end envisioned must be attractive but neither too remote nor too readily attained.

Ancients and moderns alike have agreed that Aristotle demands more than Epicurus but less than the Stoics. On his account, hedonism is not the basis for morality, nor are the standards for virtue so high that happiness is threatened with extinction. Indeed, given that happiness is our natural end, a remote ideal that is rarely achieved would upset the teleology of
nature—unless we are like insects, profligate propagators so a lucky few can reach the goal. Aristotle himself claims that his account makes happiness "possible for all who are not disabled for virtue" (NE 1.9 1099b19), and I’ve argued elsewhere that both his analysis of the formal conditions of finality and self-sufficiency and his account of the material and social conditions needed for happiness set a "modest" ideal. But here my question is whether his account of virtue fits his own constraints. Given that account, how likely is the possibility he advertises? If he is right, after all, we all have a serious stake in knowing how hard it is to be good. Happiness is what he says we care about most, and he argues that it consists in virtuous conduct. It may not make any difference to know one is virtuous; but it contradicts eudaimonism to suggest we shouldn’t care whether we are. At least from a practical perspective, then, it is worth asking how demanding Aristotle’s standards are for virtue and its exercise. Are they arduous, indulgent, or where in between?

One way to find an answer would be to catalogue the kinds of conduct he approves and disapproves in his accounts of the several virtues and to compare his theory with the views and conduct of his or our age. More than cumbersome, however, this would grant more authority to conventional norms than their variability and fallibility warrant. A more reliable answer can be found by looking at Aristotle’s analysis of virtue itself, by disregarding specific acts and focusing instead on virtuous motives and reasons for action. In particular, what is the point of his frequent claim that the virtuous act "because of the fine" (διὰ τὸ καλὸν) and value their conduct "because of itself" (δι’ αὐτό) or "for itself" (αὐτὸ ἐνεκα)? My approach to this question, however, will be rather circuitous. I shall focus on a contrast between "natural" and "perfect" virtue, between φυσική and τελεία ἀρετή. The former, I argue, is a rudimentary form of

1. Aristotle seems to consider ethical "disability" uncommon; cf. NE 7.1 1145a30-1 and 7.5, on the rarity of "savagery" and its relation to disease and disability. On the formal conditions, see White 1990, and on the role of prosperity, see White 1992.

2. These terms, which lie at the heart of his theory of virtue, are rarely handled with the precision their importance warrants. For an excellent discussion, see Broadie 1991, esp. 90-5, 373-83.