



Vicious Solidity and Failed Flourishing **Jennifer Rothschild**

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Aristotle's worst psychological constitution, the constitution of the vicious person, looks to be in some sense both more unified and more stable than the slightly better constitutions of the continent and incontinent person. This arguably creates trouble for how we should understand Aristotelian virtue and flourishing, since unity and stability are the very features of virtue that ensure its contribution to flourishing. If vice has more of these features than its near betters, then we will need an argument for why the vicious person is not, of the four constitutions, second in line for flourishing. In the following paper I aim to articulate and then resolve this trouble by offering a reading of viciousness as more continuous with continence and incontinence than it is usually taken to be. Instead of considering the descent of constitutions in light of the place of psychic conflict, particularly at the point of action, I consider the descent of constitutions in light of the solidity in continence, incontinence, and vice. I argue that to the extent there is agreement within the vicious person, the agreement is anchored in solidity and not stability. Solidity is not aimed at stable order so much as it is at control by force. It, and the vicious constitution that so exemplifies it, is defensive, stubborn and inward looking. Viciousness is an enemy of virtue because it invests in its own blindness—it creates its solidity (its somewhat enduring 'coherence') by insulating itself from the better reasons and desires of the vicious person and also from a shared life with other people. The forceful creation of solidity around local psychic agreements is not the second-most flourishing life, but the furthest from flourishing of the four constitutions.

1. Unity, stability, and flourishing

For Aristotle, the flourishing of a person tracks activity done from a unified constitution. One is unified when she is rationally organized as a good human being ought to be: when she reasons well, desires what is good, and her practically rational part and her desiring part "speak in the same voice."¹ Unity is not only between the rational part and the desiring part, but further requires the desiring part be itself internally organized.² Aristotle says that the excellent person "makes the same judgments as himself, and desires the same things in respect of his whole soul."³ The excellent person is thus pulled together toward what is good, on the same page as herself in pursuing it. When a person is so organized, she acts "well and finely," from a place of "activity of soul in accordance with excellence [virtue]."⁴ A person in a unified condition is thus in possession of the virtues of action, namely, practical wisdom and the character virtues like justice, generosity, courage, and the rest.

Unity promotes the flourishing of a human being by offering the only good path to psychic stability and consistent, virtuous activity. Aristotle says that "in no aspect of what human beings do is there such stability as there is in activities in accordance with excellence," activities which are "firm-rooted" in the people who engage in them.⁵ Here he argues that virtuous constitutions—integrated, whole souls—are stable, not only because of the structure that unity brings, but also because they are deeply seated in their bearer. He argues further that virtuous

¹ NE I.13 1102b29. Unless otherwise noted, all references and citations to the *Nicomachean Ethics* are to Broadie and Rowe (2002). Oxford University Press.

² NE VI.13 1144b33-1145a2

³ NE IX 1166a14-15

⁴ NE I.7 1098a15-17

⁵ NE I.10 1100b13-14

activity is stable-making: excellent activity issues from a virtuous constitution and serves to maintain it as well. We might add to this two further markers of the stability of virtue. First, the virtuous person has a stable relationship to what is, in fact, good, and is able to be guided by it. Second, she is the one who is most stably related to other people. She is able to be friends with other people, to join together and act well together for common, good purposes, to flourish as the social creature she is.⁶

Of course the world may still interfere with the flourishing of the unified and stable person, but all other things being equal, she is the one with the most secure and ongoing opportunity to be successful at being a person. She is built for a kind of inner success, a wisdom and peace, free from some of the battles of intrapsychic conflict of the lesser constitutions. And she has the opportunity for a life of activity befitting a human being. She is able to do, and do well, together with others. This person, for Aristotle, is flourishing: “What we are looking for, then, will belong to the happy man, and throughout life he will be such as we say; for he will always, or most of all people, do and reflect on what is in accordance with excellence.”⁷

2. Disunity and conflict in the descent of constitutions

Agents who fall short of full virtue are still evaluable in light of that standard and also, in an important sense, organized toward it even when though they do not meet it. Practically speaking, what this means is that the achievement of virtue admits of partial credit: agents who are not in possession of virtuous constitutions are still partly unified and stable, the more so as they come closer to virtue itself. The continent person, for example, especially the person of very high continence, enjoys almost-virtue. Her desires are largely integrated, and her reasoning and desire are, from the point of view of considering her whole soul, largely on the same page. The person of lower continence is less unified and less stable. The akratic is still farther from both unity and stability.

By contrast with the virtuous person, however, the most noticed marker of both the continent and incontinent person is psychic *disunity* and even conflict (among the desires, between reason and desire). In other words, partly unified and partly stable also means partly disunified and unstable, the more so as we move farther in constitution type from virtue itself.

The continent and incontinent person are intra-psychically disunified at the point of action and also from the point of view of the whole soul. At the point of action, both have limited right reasoning combined with a bad desire. For example, suppose reason tells me rightly that I should keep my mouth shut in such-and-such case, but I am inappropriately angry at someone, and I have a strong desire to let them know they are wrong, and that I see they are wrong. This lands me in a state of psychic conflict, torn between what reason advises and what desire wants. If I am a continent person, the action turns out better, since reason carries the performance and I refrain from acting on my anger. For the akratic, the bad desire carries the action against the agent’s better judgment, for example, if I were to act badly and let my pettiness show. Intra-psychic conflict is visible not just in the local action, but also in the overall constitution of continent and incontinent people. A one-off action conflict is not enough to mark a person as having a

⁶ NE IX.4, IX.6

⁷ NE I.10 1100b18-21

constitution. Rather, these constitutions belong to those with enduring intra-psychic conflicts of the relevant kind. The continent person is the one who is able to keep her anger appropriately in check even though she is ongoingly tempted to do otherwise. The akratic one aspires to do this, but never seems to be able to keep herself from snapping at the person who frustrates her.

If Aristotle is right about this, then it is easy to see how the continent and incontinent person disrupt their own flourishing. They act from a place of disunity and relative agential instability, under threat from bad desires. At the very least they bear the marks of anxiety and struggle, for fighting off one's bad and disordered desires requires psychic investment. Self-control—a condition Aristotle ascribes to the continent person, the one who can abide by her convictions—can be exhausting. The akratic is in a still worse position, for unlike the continent person, she hasn't got the action right. She has to battle the same bad desires as the continent person (plus likely some others, too, being overall less ordered than the continent person). In her case, too, Aristotle says, failed agency comes with regret. The akratic is the person who lacks self-control, who is kind of a mess and hates this about herself. No matter how many times she reminds herself to do better the next time, here she is again, having said the inappropriately angry thing. Given all this, we have good reason to think that the continent person is getting by pretty well in the world, though with more struggle and less peace than the virtuous person, and that the incontinent person, bless her heart, is having a very tough time of acting well.

3. Two Aristotelian readings of vice

The vicious person has the worst of Aristotle's four constitutions. She is the farthest from being virtuous, in the sense that it would take the most to transform her into one who is virtuous. In fact, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* at least, Aristotle thinks the vicious condition bad enough to be incurable.⁸ Her actions are as bad as actions come: not only do her desires lead her astray, but her reason endorses her bad desires' pursuit. She does the bad thing, like the incontinent person, but she does it on purpose (rather than from weakness).⁹

In light of this we might expect the patterns that held in the fall from virtue to continence to incontinence to continue as we descend to vice. After all, vice is the next worst constitution following *akrasia*, so surely it is the least unified and stable of the four. We might expect the vicious person to display an increasing messiness of reason and desire (especially at the level of the whole soul), an increasing inability to move through the world well, an investment in fighting off psychic conflict so pervasive and so futile as to destroy the soul.¹⁰ From this point of view, whatever agreement exists between reason and desire in the vicious person is merely apparent, a thin cover for a mess underneath.

In NE IX.4 Aristotle argues for a picture of disordered vice very much like the one just characterized. There he says that the vicious person is at odds with himself. He is not lovable and

⁸ In the *Categories* Aristotle suggests the opposite, that the vicious person is redeemable.

⁹ Aristotle writes: "In fact the un-self-controlled person resembles a city which passes all the decrees it should, and has good laws, but makes no attempt to put them into effect...whereas the bad person resembles a city that puts its laws into effect, but bad ones. NE VII.10 1152a20-25

¹⁰ As will eventually become clear, I think all these things are true of the vicious person, but the story behind them is quite complicated. I return to these points directly in the conclusion, based upon the arguments about solidity in the sections preceding it.

does not love himself.¹¹ His “soul is in a state of faction, and one side, because of depravity, grieves at being held back from certain things, whereas the other is pleased, the one pulling in this way and the other in that, as if tearing the soul apart.”¹² There is no stronger statement of psychic disunity than this. “Base people,” Aristotle continues, “are full of regret”¹³ and actively avoid life: “they hate and even flee from living, and ruin themselves.”¹⁴ On this reading of the vicious person, whereupon the vicious person is an enemy of life’s activity, viciousness appears like incontinence but worse: weak, regretful, conflicted, and ruined. So understood, vice is easy to cast as the least flourishing condition.

The dramatic version of this understanding of vice is familiar to us in Plato’s picture of the tyrant; what is left of the tyrant at his worst is mostly a small and paranoid reason overrun by lawless desire.¹⁵ Yet we do not need to go as deep as the tyrant to conceive of a person like this. Think of the person who is a coward, truly—who knows this about herself and has given in to it, but continues to hate it about herself. Or think of the person in the throes of addiction, who habitually marshals her best reasons in service of acquiring more of that devastating pleasure, but who is still hard on herself for not being able to make things otherwise. The IX.4 understanding of vice as disunified, a life of instability, and destructive is a version of the vicious person familiar to us. Aristotle, and Plato, are right about this characterization of vice.

But there is another version of the vicious person we know, one that Aristotle also recognizes, and one which presents more of a challenge for reading viciousness as one step more disunified and unstable than *akrasia*. In NE VII we get a vicious person who is much more secure in his agency than the one we see in book IX.¹⁶ In NE VII, Aristotle highlights the feature of vice that most separates it from its near betters of incontinence and even continence: at the point of action, the vicious person has agreement between reason and desire about what to do. Aristotle nowhere denies this feature of vice, but here it is presented in a way that reminds us we have not seen this kind of agreement since the virtuous constitution. In other words, in NE VII, the agreement of reason and desire does not look like something merely apparent and covering for a disunified mess, but rather, the agreement looks to be doing some actual work to parallel vice with virtue. For instance, as we see in virtue, the agreement in the vicious person’s action is a marker of choice as well as kind of commitment to that choice.¹⁷ Aristotle says, “the [vicious] person is deliberately choosing when he is led on, since he believes that he should always pursue what is

¹¹ NE IX.4 1166b17, 1166b25-26

¹² NE IX.4 1166b20-22

¹³ NE IX.4 1166b25

¹⁴ NE IX.4 1166b12 in translation by Reeve (2014). Hackett.

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic* (1992). Grube and Reeve. Hackett. Book IX 571a-576c

¹⁶ Much ink has been spilled by ancient philosophers on the question of whether Aristotle has a consistent account of vice or in fact has two competing takes on it. (Add references here.) I will not offer an argument on that issue one way or another. For the purposes of my paper I concentrate more on the NE VII account than the NE IX account simply because it makes things more interesting and difficult for main issue at hand: whether vice can promote flourishing. I do think my account of vice in this paper is consistent with NE IX as well, as I hope will become clear by the end.

¹⁷ We need not think here that the vicious person has to act from a commitment to some overarching belief about what it is good to do.

pleasant as pleasant.”¹⁸ Supporting this parallel on deliberate choice is some of what he says in book III, for example, when he claims that “Virtue is up to us, and similarly, vice.”¹⁹

We might think this version of the vicious person is a more stable and unified agent than we would expect moving one step worse than *akrasia*. She looks to be, at least to some extent, on the same page with herself. She has signed up for her own agency, and is putting her reason to use getting things done—here, the pursuit of what she finds pleasant. In this sense she is less in conflict than she is a kind of *persuaded*: Aristotle says that an *akratic* “is the sort who pursues bodily pleasures that are excessive and contrary to the correct reason but not because he is persuaded that he should. [A vicious] person, on the other hand, is persuaded, because he is the sort of person to pursue them.”²⁰ In this passage Aristotle says that unlike the *akratic*, who is internally conflicted and also ends up acting in conflict with himself, the vicious person is neither internally conflicted nor acting at odds with the sort of person he is. He has, Aristotle says in NE VII, no regrets.²¹

This vicious person is not the self-hating coward, but is, for example, the stunningly efficient and unapologetic moneymaker. This is the unjust person, or the self-indulgent one. We know this person, too. Such a person is in a condition that looks like it is enduring; it might be both deep and reliable in the way it is built (reliably bad, but still reliable). Should we call this stability? She might cohere in some ways, and be able to build something of a coherent life around her vicious way of being—should we say she has a kind of unity, both internally and with the world? She probably has, in some sense, and by contrast especially with the *akratic* person, a functioning kind of agency. She is capable of effective instrumental reasoning and action. She gets things done; she makes that money. And she might, like the continent person at least, make this look effortless; we might imagine her, like the virtuous person, being relatively inwardly untroubled by her reasons, desires, and actions. In light of this, should we allow that she enjoys a kind of flourishing?

Here we might think the virtue ethicist lands in a bit of trouble. This second version of the vicious person—the effectively vicious person—calls for explanation. Aristotle clearly notices this kind of vicious person, and we, moreover, do not want to disagree with him that such a person is one of the world’s regular kinds. Yet we do not want to give up on the thought that this vicious person must be, like all forms of viciousness, the worst off constitution for unity, stability, and flourishing. This must be true even while she seems to resist our reading her as one more step in the fall, reminding us in some ways of what the better constitutions can do. Ultimately, if we want to deny that the effectively vicious person is second in line for flourishing (behind virtue, but ahead of the conflicted constitutions), we will need an account of why this is so, an account that makes clear why we should not ultimately treat the seeming coherence and solidity that can appear in the vicious constitution as unity and stability.

4. Solidity of constitution

¹⁸ NE VII.3 1146b22-24 (Reeve)

¹⁹ NE III.5 1113b5 (Reeve)

²⁰ NE VII.8 1151a10-14

²¹ NE VII.7 1150a22; NE VII.8 1150b30

The descent of constitutions sets expectations for vice because it is a story that moves by relations of continuity. Developments thread between the constitutions as we move from better to worse. Especially striking to readers is the messiness and conflict of a person, increasing as we move from virtue to continence to incontinence. We expect that pattern to continue to vice, and so when we encounter the effectively vicious person, we are surprised: features of her defy seem to interrupt the continuity of the descent. I suggest that if we want to square the vicious person's seeming intactness and efficacy with her place in the pattern of constitutions, we should start by revisiting the pattern of constitutions. For the coming-into-being of the akratic mess is not the only storyline of the descent, and other interesting continuities may set different expectations to which the effectively vicious may conform.²² In particular, we should consider not just the ways that the lesser constitutions are falling apart, but also the ways in which they are held together, toward action, even while they fail to flourish. I argue that one overlooked continuity, relying on a distinction between stability and solidity of constitution, is a way in to just such a pattern.

Let us begin back with the continent and incontinent constitutions and work our way to vice.

For all that continence and incontinence are characterized by disunity, they are still *constitutions*. These people are held together in some way or other, too.

To be sure, some of the constituting is accomplished by way of their partial stability. Stable agents are held together by reasons and desires that are unified—integrated in support of ongoing good action. Stability, recall, can be partial, and one's constitution can be stable to the extent it is structured by practical virtue. In other words, a constitution borrows stability from the unity of virtue insofar as it is genuinely successful in achieving partial virtue. In a person like the continent person, whose soul is quite far along in approaching virtue, we expect to see quite a lot of unity and stability. In the incontinent person we see less of it, though some unity and stability remain. The akratic retains a relationship with what is good through her reasoning at least, and likely through many of her (at times too quiet) good desires. This lends her goodness a bit of support, and serves as a platform for moral progress should she be interested in pursuing that.

Continent and akratic people are constituted not only by stability, however, but also by *solidity* of reason or character. Solidity is psychic organization that works to keep us where we are, however good or bad that should happen to be.

Let us consider our continent angry person once more. She is itching to act badly on her inappropriate anger, but her better judgment has (so far) kept her in check. Typically, when we highlight the continent person's success, we notice this: at the point of action, her mostly good reasoning triumphs over her not-so-good desire. Her success is also visible in the partial stability of her whole soul, which is characterized by relatively good reasoning and desire and action. But if a person is continent, such that she consistently finds herself in this kind of situation of needing to act continently, the triumph of a single, good reason over a persistent bad desire is not the whole story. Nor is her overall partial goodness the only thing holding her together in her

²² One interesting continuity here I will not discuss here is the increasing weakness of reason. Though still effective instrumentally in vice, the vicious person's reason assents to desire rather than directing it. Whereas the akratic's reason still fights against bad desire, the vicious person's reason submits to it.

continued continence.²³ If our agent consistently finds herself needing to draw upon her continence, she has ways she does this—her ways, the ways she knows will work to keep her from acting angrily. If we zoom out from the point of action just a little bit, the best characterization of her continuing to act rightly includes her having a support staff of reasons and desires for her right (but threatened) action. She invests in and relies on this support staff to keep her together in the face of potential incontinence. This is her solidity, that part of her psychic organization that strategically maintains her constitution.

Importantly, her supporting reasons, even those that agree with the right action, will not be exclusively good ones. She needs reasons that support her conviction not to lash out, and she will take what she can get. For example, perhaps she is able to quiet her angry action by assuring herself that silence now will allow for more impactful anger at a future time. She need not lose out on her enemy's comeuppance; she must only wait until she can act in a more appropriate moment, when she will be ready with just the right thing to say. She may also have desires contributing to holding her continence, desires which are themselves bad in some way but which support the conviction not to act badly. For example, suppose she desires that her enemy not see they have gotten the better of her, desires which support her restraint while remaining desires the good person would not have.²⁴ What matters for solidity is not the goodness of the reasons or desires in it, nor whether the set of the reasons and desires amount to the best way of handling things. What matters is that this agent's continence is able to operate in part by determination. She is able to accomplish her continence in part by strategies for keeping herself solid.

Solidity is what happens when one's reasons and desires join in a configuration that is stubborn, aimed first at self-maintenance, and resistant to change. This is a psychic strategy of some value. In the continent or incontinent person, where bad desires threaten the agent, solidity helps preserve existing partial goodness and helps the agent fight off becoming worse. But this value is limited, and solidity is actually bad for us in several ways. For one, as we saw above, solidity is bad for us because even when it is deployed to maintain our partial goodness, it consists of reasons and desires which are themselves bad.²⁵ In other words, even when it is helping us defend against becoming worse, it is doing this in the wrong ways. Aristotle is clear that acting on bad reasoning and desire makes us worse, deforms us, and works against our own flourishing. Second, solidity is an obstacle to moral progress. It is a psychic strategy that may do well at holding the line, but it also closes down the possibility of transformation of reason or desire for the better. If someone wants to become a better person than she is, she will likely have to work to undo pockets of solidity in her soul before she can start to build stability. She'll have to get

²³ Though overall goodness *is* the part of her that is keeping her partly stable and unified, keeping her in common with the person of virtue.

²⁴ Alongside these bad reasons and desires, of course, she has both desires and reasons that work against the good action. Her bad desires are, in part, those with which we are familiar in the continent person, the inappropriate anger itself and the desires to act on it. She also has reasons that agree with her bad desires, a whole battery of thoughts about why she is justified in being angry as she is, even while knowing she ought not act on it. For example, her enemy really has no excuse for acting this way, and after all, they promised not to do this again...

²⁵ To be sure, because she is partly good, she has other, good reasons and desires supporting her (mostly) right convictions, too. But importantly, her solidity cannot rest on that which is exclusively good; if it could, the agent would be unified and stable. This agent is held together by an organization including bad reasons and desires. In solidity, it is necessarily the case that some of what joins together in stubborn configurations are bad on their own.

messier before she gets more unified. Third, solidity is not a permanent solution but requires regular maintenance; being stubborn requires psychic effort. And while it is worth spending psychic effort to be good or to be better, this is psychic effort spent to remain just as bad as we are. Finally, stubbornly organized reasons and desires are not open to encountering anything new. Everything met must be accommodated in one of the following ways: folded into what is there, ignored, or treated as an enemy. The first form of accommodation welcomes what is already akin to it, and the latter two are ways of keeping things away. In other words, the self-maintenance of solidity involves insulating oneself from the world to some extent. Solid people are closed off to situations, to people; they experience the world as confirming what they already know instead of having the opportunity to teach them.

We can see all these features in our continent angry person. She may continue to act continentally, partly because she has built a kind of solidity around this consistent problem of hers. But she accomplishes her determination to remain controlled by at least partly bad patterns of reason and desire. These patterns of reasoning and desire do not lessen her anger, nor do they open possibilities to improve her relationship to it. She is not on the path to considering whether she has understood her enemy unjustly, nor is she relying on the patience and generosity she uses so easily with other her friends to help her do better in this part of her life, nor is she asking what about her makes her react this way. She is partly sure she is justified in this situation, even while she knows acting on it would be inappropriate. Her psychic effort is engaged in the never-ending task of keeping her anger from appearing in action,²⁶ and she is determined to continue digesting the world and other people in ways that do not disrupt this continence. This is solidity. In absence of stability, people can hold themselves together by force, investing in their own badness in the guise of keeping what is theirs.

We can follow this pattern to the incontinent person, which I will not discuss in detail here. The akratic is not as good at holding herself to her convictions as is the continent person, but she still, and even more so than the continent person, locks herself into her own world of bad desires and poor justifications. She builds a solid plan for pursuit and failure and follows it on repeat. She is, for example, endlessly self-obsessed with her new plan for dieting, which is of course going to change her life but, by the way, is too hard for anyone without a personal chef to maintain. Or she is always going to accomplish that task this weekend, but inevitably so many things came up and she never started it. The incontinent is working very hard to stay in exactly the same place without having to truly confront alternatives. She is always trying to change, but without being able to face up to what it would mean to do so. Thus, though in some sense the messiest of constitutions, the akratic is in her own way quite reliable and solid. Her distinguishing cry is one of repetition of the very same: "Here we go again."

This way of characterizing the continent or incontinent person pays less attention to the ways in which she is like the virtuous person, though to be sure, she has her share of that. Here we are emphasizing instead what she has in common with the vicious person. She has pockets of her reasoning and character that have developed in a stubborn configuration. If she were to ever want to improve her soul, she would need to loosen her solidity in order to improve her stability. We would expect the same of a person of vice; to get better, a vicious person would need to disorder

²⁶ The psychic effort may also be engaged in the work of compartmentalization, working to ensure her anger does not spread within in her.

what is in her before she could reorder toward the good. These two ways of being held together, the ways of the virtuous and of the vicious, stability and solidity, are thus both genuine ways of configuring. They both contribute to constitution. Stability is the only one of them, however, that aligns with what is good, has the potential to be global, occupies the target of moral progress, and is a genuine solution to psychic disunity. Solidity, by contrast, is a strategy for stasis. It is sometimes useful, but it has no particular relationship with what is good, is only ever local, is an enemy of progress, and is compatible with persistent disunity.

Our pockets of solidity thus lend us some places of psychic agreement forged by conviction as opposed to by unity. This is clearly not a marker of flourishing; in fact, though solidity looks in some way to preserve agency against something worse, it also looks to be precisely an enemy of excellent activity and of psychic peace. Successful as they may be, something about the way the continent and akratic person are organized disrupts the possibility of their being organized any better than they are, disrupts their openness to the world, traps their aims in a self-serving way of making sense. This is not the kind of flourishing we expect from the person of virtue. The good person does not need solidity to maintain herself; through genuine unity, she can remain stably anchored to herself, to the world, and to other people.

5. Vicious solidity

We have been approaching the fallen constitutions from multiple points of view. Looking at the point of action of the continent or incontinent person, what we see most clearly is disagreement between reason and desire. Looking at the whole soul, what we see most clearly is partial unity and stability but also partial disunity and instability (worse in the akratic). Taking a kind of mid-level view on the agent, we see her bad pockets of solidity. They are bad because they are stubborn configurations of bad reasons and desires. They are also bad because they are enemies of the whole soul's goodness, of the agent's openness to the world, and of her potential for becoming better. The solidity in an agent persists because it helps her continue to act as herself, constituting her as the one she already is, even when the one she already is is, in part, bad.

An interesting feature of the mid-level view emerges here, owing to the way it ties stubbornness of soul to self-maintaining action. There is a kind of predictable agreement between the solidity in the agent and the point of action. In the continent and incontinent person, we would expect the solidity to agree more with the part of her carrying the action—in the continent person, that is her (limited) right reason; in the incontinent person, that is her (mostly) bad desire. In the vicious person, to whom we now turn, solidity can agree with both reason and desire, since the two together carry the action. In other words, in the vicious person, we would expect a greater sort of agreement between her bad patterns and her point of action. In the vicious person the solid organization of good/bad reasons and good/bad desires will be both wider in scope and more enduring. This is because her solidity is not facing down conflict from her lead reasons or loudest desires but enjoys support from both.

We should not think, however, that this places the vicious person in a harmonious relationship with herself and with the world. To see this we need to take the thought about solidity above and apply it in more detail to the vicious person.

Aristotle casts the stubbornness of the vicious person as in one way like the continent person, and in another way like the incontinent person:

There are some people that tend to ‘stick to their judgment’ who are called stubborn, the ones who are hard to persuade, i.e. not easily persuaded to change their minds: they have a degree of resemblance to the [continent] type, just as the wasteful do to the open-handed, and the rash to the confident, but they are different in many respects. For in the [continent person] it is the affective state of appetite that fails to effect a change... whereas with the stubborn sort it is reason, since in fact they do acquire appetites, and many of them are led on by pleasures. It is the opinionated, the uneducated, and the boorish who are stubborn—the opinionated being motivated by pleasure and pain, in so far as they take pleasure in winning if someone fails to persuade them, and are pained if their own judgments are invalidated, like decrees; so they are more like the [incontinent person] than they are like the [continent one].²⁷

Here Aristotle argues several points of use for the discussion at hand. There is something about the continent person, he says, that looks similar to the person who is stubborn (the truly stubborn person being the vicious person). The resemblance comes from the way in which stubborn people tend to “stick to their judgment” in the same way the continent person holds to her convictions. But, Aristotle says, the continent person is more rationally more open to change than the other bad constitutions, and so has the potential to be persuaded to something better.²⁸ In this way, despite appearances, the continent person is not stuck to her judgments as the truly stubborn person is.²⁹ The incontinent is, in another way, most like the vicious person, since they are both led by appetites. The incontinent person subordinates reason to the pursuit of pleasure and pain. Like the incontinent person, the vicious person’s reason operates by connection to bad uses of pleasure and pain. Like the continent person, the vicious person’s reason is not easily persuaded to change—or more precisely, it is stubbornly determined not to change. When a vicious person ties together the pursuit of pleasure and pain with her stubbornness, what we see is pain at the possibility of being shown up as wrong, and pleasure when victorious in the face of attempts to persuade her otherwise.

In this version of the vicious person we can see someone who will need to exert her psychic energy to self-maintain. She is led by pleasure, and what she needs to maintain her pleasure is to be right, or to at least believe she is right. Given we know her reasons and desires are largely bad ones, her need to go on believing she is right will face strong evidence and arguments to the contrary. To oppose these, or more likely, to ignore them, she is going to require a great deal of solidity. At the mid-level perspective on her soul, we should expect to see a more dominating presence of solidity than we saw with the continent or incontinent person. As Aristotle says, this kind of vicious person is the one who is truly stubborn. Uneasy as the forging of agreement may be between bad reasons and desires, she can accomplish it, at least temporarily, if she is determined enough.

Despite her determination, however, the vicious person can be undone if she is shown up as wrong, especially if she is *very* wrong or something like *fundamentally* wrong or forced into a

²⁷ NE VII.9 1151b5-16

²⁸ This, we may want to say, is owing to her better partial stability overall.

²⁹ Even though her desires are more stubborn than her reason is

position that she *cannot help but see* she is wrong. If this is the threat to her, then this is what she will fight at all cost; it is where her psychic investments go. Practically speaking, what this means is that she will bring the perspective she is determined is right to each encounter and find ways to understand whatever she finds as confirming what she already knows. When she is uneasy with something she finds, she has options: if she encounters a claim to goodness opposed to the way she operates, she can deny the truth of it, making that claim her enemy. She can, alternatively, re-describe the world she meets to match her. For example, the vicious person tends to think that other people's so-called ethics are mere adherence to convention.³⁰ When presented with someone who thinks she is wrong, or that she is doing something bad, she might find that other's allegiance to certain opinions adorable—luckily she, vicious person, is an independent thinker, and not so trapped by the views of the masses. In re-describing the other this way, she frees herself from the possibility that other is right about something. A third strategy of the vicious person is indifference, a kind of willful ignorance and refusal to allow ethical considerations to come into view or to impose upon her actions.³¹ The white-collar criminal orchestrating mortgage scams operates this way: by not thinking about it.³² Such a person always sort of knows, in a way, what their work means for people on the other end of the scheme, but they also sort of don't know—they have not taken it on board in the way a virtuous person would. They are not open to other people in any way that would allow those other people to show up as concerns of justice.

This version of the psychology of the vicious, particularly the psychology of the person of indifference, is subtly captured by Arendt's portrait of Adolf Eichmann.³³ As she tells it, Eichmann was a man best characterized by an inability to think, and in particular "his almost total inability to ever look at anything from another person's point of view."³⁴ Eichmann displayed what can only be called a kind of stunning narcissism, mostly centered around his career; he could, many years later when on trial for his crimes, recall events of the past only in connection with what was happening in his work at the time, but never in terms of what was happening to the victims of his actions.³⁵ Of course such self-centeredness creates a kind of coherence in one's life—if one never sees anything but a confirmation of a view already hers, she can be quite held together by that. Eichmann's identity, or at least the identity he had during his favorite part of his life when he was a Nazi of medium importance, was dependent on his role in the solution of the Jewish question. Arendt paints him as a man who had been a failure all his life,³⁶ who finally found something he was good at:³⁷ organizing and transporting Jews, acting as

³⁰ I owe this thought to conversation with Nathan Rothschild.

³¹ I owe this thought to conversation with and work by Julia Annas. (Fill in after asking JA for permission to cite unpublished work.)

³² I owe this example to conversation with Nathan Rothschild.

³³ Arendt, Hannah. (1992) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin.

³⁴ *Eichmann*, pp. 47-48

³⁵ *Eichmann*, p. 53. In one notable story on p. 51, Eichmann displays the depths of his self-centeredness: a Jewish man with whom he formerly worked summons him to a concentration camp, hoping Eichmann may be able to help rescue him in some way. But Eichmann, encountering this man in the camp, is incapable of relating to the man except to commiserate with him over his misfortune, something Eichmann thought about himself as well. As Eichmann told the story, saying to a man in such conditions "We certainly got it! What rotten luck!" was a "normal, human encounter."

³⁶ *Eichmann*, p. 33

³⁷ *Eichmann* finally found that "There were two things he could do well, better than others: he could organize and he could negotiate," p. 45.

an expert on the Jewish question.³⁸ Here we see the vicious person, building a life around his viciousness, getting things done. He is effective in his viciousness, and this effectiveness is made possible by his narrowness of vision, in this case by caring about his career success to the exclusion of all else.

Of course, we should not think that the kind of coherence built by indifference to all but one's own view is stable. All that has to happen for the whole thing to crash at once is for the vicious person to come face to face with being wrong in a way she cannot ignore. The mortgage scheme collapses. Or Eichmann's willful ignorance is shattered: though he was aware as early as 1939 that the 'final aim' could only mean 'physical extermination' of the Jews,³⁹ was able to avoid letting this truth settle into him for two more years. He remembers the 1941 moment of gravity, when Heydrich puts the intention to murder so directly that Eichmann cannot ignore it. Eichmann describes his reaction as follows:

In the first moment, I was unable to grasp the significance of what he had said, because he was so careful in choosing his words, and then I understood, and didn't say anything, because there was nothing to say any more. For I had never thought of such a thing, such a solution through violence. I now lost everything, all joy in my work, all initiative, all interest; I was, so to speak, blown out.⁴⁰

Even in this moment, when everything comes crashing for Eichmann, when he loses both his ignorance (which is more indifference; as I say, he already 'knew') and all his pleasure—even here, when the real deaths of other people press in on him in a way he cannot ignore, he can still only process this loss as a loss to himself: he *loses all joy in his work*.

The Eichmann example brings into view the version of the vicious person we were looking for from Aristotle's NE VII account of vice. As long as things are going how he wants them to go, Eichmann looks to be sailing somewhat smoothly. He looks like an effective agent. In fact, he has a bit of a reputation for being the one who can take a very complicated process—deportation—and achieve great results.⁴¹ His internal solidity is substantial and in its own malformed way coherent, so for the most part he is able to encounter the world narrowly, with blinders and psychic weapons prepared to maintain an identity. From here, he can take pleasure in his choices and actions. He operates with seeming ease because he constrains the possibilities to those which are easy and pleasurable for him. But narrowness of this kind—even narrowness agreed upon by both reason and desire—is a way of retreating from activity, and from the world. The determination to see only what one wants is, as solidity always is, exhausting. It is hard work not noticing the humanity of other people, fighting off or re-describing or ignoring every bit of evidence to the contrary. Even Eichmann falls to it if confronted with it in the right way. The soul-consuming but narrowly-constructed solidity of vice isn't a stable way of moving through the world; it holds together over a range, but can be unseated in its entirety in the right circumstances.

³⁸ Eichmann, p. 25, 40, and elsewhere.

³⁹ Eichmann, p. 77

⁴⁰ Eichmann, pp. 83-84

⁴¹ See especially Eichmann pp. 44-45: "He must have been frantic to make good, and his success was spectacular: in eight months, forty-five thousand Jews left Austria." He accomplished so much in so little time by centralizing all the paperwork for deportation to one location, organized into a kind of assembly line.

In NE VII Aristotle says that the effectively vicious person does not have regrets. In the NE IX account, when he is focusing on the collapse and disunity of the vicious person, and in particular when he is doing this as part of a discussion on friendship, Aristotle says that the vicious person is full of regrets. I think we can square these accounts. Noticeably, the IX.4 account sounds like a story about a vicious person who is no longer at the height of her effective powers. This is the vicious person after the fall, alone and looking back, unhappy about how things turned out. It is not clear the vicious person here regrets things in the way we might like her to—for the right reasons, taking responsibility for the bad she has done. The regret here sounds like the regret one has when things did not work out for her, regret that her life came to this, that she has no friends, that all her hard work brought her to nothing. Arendt says Eichmann tended to talk about himself as a victim of fate, a bad luck case that landed on trial for crimes against humanity. For all his vicious efficacy, he did not accept the agency for his demise.⁴² The mortgage scammer surely has similar regrets about how things have gone—and may even regret the doing of them to the extent that the results came to be—but this can all be done while remaining vicious, without becoming a better person. The thought here is that viciousness can catch up to someone and destroy their illusion of flourishing, can make the disunity that was always there present by shattering the solidity that once covered it up. This is why the vicious person is incurable: even having met with reality and fallen apart, she does not have the psychological tools to hold herself together internally, or with the world and the people in it.

Conclusion

In section three I said that if we understand Aristotle's telling of the descent of constitutions by way of increasing psychic disorder, we come to vice with a set of expectations: increasing messiness of reason and desire (especially at the level of the whole soul), an increasing inability to move through the world well, and an investment in fighting off psychic conflict so pervasive and so futile as to destroy the soul. This is the story of the vicious person we find in book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Though the aim of this paper has been to read the descent of constitutions another way, through increasing psychic solidity, attentive to the effectively vicious person of book VII, I think revisiting these expectations reveals the truth of them. Though the vicious person is held together (even, perhaps, a large part of her is held together), she is not held together at the level of the whole soul. There, she is disunified, and the conflict between the identity she has constructed and her nature is so wide that she can be unseated and destroyed at any time. Moreover, though she looks to move through the world well at times, she does so only over a very narrow range of description. The vicious person carefully manages the world by managing herself. She may be capable of imposing herself on the world, of acting to suit her pleasure. But if she is, she can only do this by diligent psychic investment. She must either force threats away or into uneasy league with who she already is. This is not the picture of someone who is unified. She is not stable. And she is not able to engage in activity that is open to the world as it is, as excellent activity of virtue must do. So understood, the vicious person is the least flourishing of Aristotle's four constitutions.

⁴² Eichmann, p. 22: "With the killing of Jews I had nothing to do. I never killed a Jew, or a non-Jew, for that matter—I never killed any human being. I never gave an order to kill either a Jew or a non-Jew; I just did not do it." He could be accused, he said, only of "'aiding and abetting' the annihilation of Jews."