A Defence of Human Nature in Aristotelian Practical Science: The Unlikely Example of C.B. Macpherson

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§1. Introduction

The distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory is typically reserved for discussions of contemporary political philosophy. Nevertheless, scholars such as Lisa Tessman (e.g. 2005, 2009) have recently applied the distinction when discussing elements of ancient political thought as well. In a recent edited volume, for instance, Tessman argues that Aristotelian eudaimonism can and should be revised to accommodate non-ideal circumstances where the exercise of virtue does not correspond to a flourishing life.[1] This paper considers another aspect of Aristotelian political philosophy which might also be judged non-ideal theory. I have in mind the sense in which Aristotle conceives of political philosophy as a practical science, evinced explicitly in passages from the first two books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*). Those pursuing practical *epistēmai* such as *politikē* or political philosophy, he says, seek "not to know what virtue is, but to become good" (1103b29-30)[2]. This sort of theory attempts, then, not merely to improve the understanding of the theorist—though that is also an important if instrumental goal for practical sciences—but to develop her <u>ability</u> to employ that understanding in her practice.[3] The knowledge it seeks to impart is practical in the sense that it represents a competence in the activities constitutive of a good human life.

My primary aim, however, is not to show how or in what sense Aristotelian *politikē* can be conceived as non-ideal theory. Indeed, the sense in which *politikē* is 'practical' or non-ideal is better appreciated in contrast with contemporary understandings of the relationship between theory and practice, or so I will argue. The main object of the paper is, instead, to defend this sort of theory against the charge that its reliance upon a conception of human nature undermines its practical aspirations, and to do so by revisiting a now rather obscure quarrel surrounding the work of C. B. Macpherson. Though usually characterized as a marxist, Macpherson's normative theory propounds a sort of perfectionist liberalism calling for the dissolution of various "impediments" to the full and fair development of what he calls "essentially human capacities."[4] A crucial component of this project is an historical dimension which seeks to trace the origins of a purported contradiction within liberal political thought and reflected in liberal democratic societies. Macpherson's hope is that a proper recognition of this inconsistency will lead to the ideological conditions necessary for its dissolution, both in liberal political thought as well as in the institutions and ideologies of liberal societies.

This project was the topic of some discussion amongst liberals and marxists alike, especially prior to being overshadowed by the liberal-communitarian debates of the 1980s. However, much of the

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[1] L. Tessman, "Feminist Eudaimonism: Eudaimonism as Non-Ideal Theory" in *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal,* (Dordrecht, NLD: Springer, 2009): 47-58.

[2] Cf. 1095a5-6. All translations of the *NE* in the paper come from T. Irwin (1999).

[3] See J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, (New York: OUP, 1993): 6-26, 29, 439-56; "Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 78 no.2 (2004): 61-75 for attempts at distinguishing this sort of theory from modern accounts of the relationship between theory and practice. Cf. T. Irwin (1999): 326, 347 for helpful mini-essays discussing the action-oriented nature of Aristotelian practical sciences. These sciences, Irwin points out, are not sciences strictly speaking (according to the usage of *epistēmē* in the *NE*) given their skill or craft-like characteristics and degree of inexactness.

[4] C.B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973): 53

discussion failed to go beyond Macpherson's best known work, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, a study devoted primarily to the historical dimension of his broader normative project. Consequently, the account of human nature and its place within the project's normative dimension has been overlooked, with some important exceptions with which the bulk of the paper is concerned. These include a handful of essays by Stephen Lukes and Virginia Held[5] as well as the work of Peter Lindsay.[6] Lukes and Held share Macpherson's enthusiasm for theory as a pedagogical tool to help students identify and overcome so-called impediments to human flourishing. Yet both are also critical of his reliance upon a conception of human nature to do so, a reliance which, they charge, issues necessarily in an inability to perceive 'internal' or psychological impediments. More specifically, Macpherson is accused of subscribing to a view of human beings incapable of appreciating the extent to which we are shaped by social forces, a fault whose source is the asocial individualism and egoistic essentialism which are said to characterize his conception of human nature. As social forces such as patriarchal ideologies or commodity fetishism are understood to be important sources of impediments to human flourishing, the practical aspiration of Macpherson's theory to help alleviate such impediments is thrown into doubt.

These claims, however, are unconvincing if we consider a more developed and widely discussed application of human nature in a theory which aims to have a similar practical function. Since Held and Lukes' argument relies upon the premise that the application of human nature <u>necessarily</u> undermines this practical function, a sufficiently relevant counter-example—which I argue is discernible in Aristotelian *politikē*—will suffice for meeting their criticisms. If the prominent role of human nature in *politikē* does not diminish the perception of human beings as creatures deeply shaped by social forces, and if Macpherson's philosophic anthropology shares these relevant attributes, the objections against this aspect of his project can be laid to rest. With this end in view, the paper proceeds in three steps. Firstly, I discuss the sense in which Aristotelian *politikē* is practical, suggesting that it is best understood in contradistinction to important features of modern moral philosophy[7] notwithstanding similarities with both ideal and non-ideal features of modern theories. Secondly, I attempt to show how Macpherson's project can be read as a variation of *politikē*, especially in its conceptualization of human nature. Finally, I argue that this conception of human nature displays neither the asocial individualism nor egoistic essentialism for which it is dismissed by Held and Lukes. Insofar as these characteristics limit this sort of 'practical' theory from perceiving the sense in which human beings are socially encumbered, and to the extent that this sort of perception is necessary for such a theory to perform its desired function, I hope to have provided a strong consideration for not dismissing Macpherson's normative project in particular and Aristotelian practical science in general.

§2. *Politikē* as 'Practical' Education

Before delving into these issues, it is important to clarify precisely what is meant by the shared aspiration of Aristotle and Macpherson to provide theories which are 'practical.' This section argues for an interpretation of what Aristotle means by this aspiration in the context of the ideal—non-ideal theory distinction to which I will then compare Macpherson's views. It will be pointed out straight away that

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[5] S. Lukes, "C.B. Macpherson and the Real and Ideal Worlds of Democracy" in A. Kontos, ed., *Powers, Possessions, and Freedom : Essays in Honour of C. B. Macpherson*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); V. Held, "Freedom and Feminism" in J. Carens, ed., *Democracy and Possessive Individualism: The Intellectual Legacy of C.B. Macpherson*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993); and V. Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[6] P. Lindsay, *Creative Individualism: The Democratic Vision of C.B. Macpherson*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) and "The 'Disembodied Self' in Political Theory: The Communitarians, Macpherson and Marx" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28, no.2 (2002): 191-211.

[7] I follow J. Annas (1993) in attributing specific features, which I specify in the ensuing section, to this otherwise very general term.

there is a sense in which it is simply anachronistic to speak of *politikē* as non-ideal theory. If we are speaking strictly in terms of its usage in *A Theory of Justice* where non-ideal theory is meant to distinguish theories which do not assume the full compliance of citizens to the principles of justice, then non-ideal theory might be considered an approach to the problem of political justification where the priority is identifying morally justifiable limits to or conditions for the existence of a system of coercive law. It would therefore be a stretch to include theories such as Aristotle's *politikē*, which do not seem to share this preoccupation, within such a category.[8]

However, if we follow Prof. Stemplowska's characterization of non-ideal theories as normative theories which provide what she calls "viable" or "AD recommendations,"[9] the goal Aristotle conceives for practitioners of *politikē* who seek "not to know what virtue is, but to become good" is more readily understood within the category. Prof. Stemplowska describes these recommendations as those which "are both achievable and desirable, as far as we can judge, in the circumstances that we are currently facing, or are likely to face in the not too distant future."[10] *Politikē* is similarly practical insofar as it aims to equip its students with a proficiency in ethical action for the real situations in which they find themselves. It is for this reason that Aristotle insists repeatedly in the *NE* that his subject matter ought not to be treated with more specificity then it admits (e.g. 1094b13-23, 1098a27-30, 1104a1-12). To do so would not be helpful to the person seeking to live well. Noble action requires good judgment and a practiced perception (*aisthēsis*) of relevant, particular factors[11] rather than adherence to a series of general formulae. This is why *politikē* is a 'practical' rather than 'theoretical' science, taking as its subject matter the variable particulars of ethical action and seeking to teach a right perception of this variability. This does not mean that *politikē* is unconcerned with theoretical matters, those concerning permanent things or universals. Indeed its high valuation of theoretical activity and theoretical treatment of the soul seem sufficient grounds for it being classified as an Aristotelian science, notwithstanding Aristotle's reservation of this term in most of the *NE* for strictly theoretical inquiry requiring exactness and concerned with outlining laws of nature (bk vi 3, 5). Instead of being totally overlooked, theoretical matters are examined for the sake of 'practical' knowledge—proficiency in noble activity—which *politikē* hopes to impart.

In other respects, however, *politikē* displays a closer affinity to Prof. Stemplowska's proposed characterization of ideal theory. Though it aims to improve activity in the imperfect, real world within which its students find themselves, its normative horizon is not bounded by the imperfections of any particular context. For instance, *politikē* obviously cannot provide certain kinds of AD recommendations for 'us' given normatively significant imperfections unique to our context in early twenty-first century Canada.[12] Indeed, if an Aristotelian practical science is to be at all relevant to improving our competence as ethical actors, it must provide normative contributions beyond the imperfections unique to its own historical context. That it does so is, I think, fairly evident.[13] One has only to think of the way Aristotle allows for certain normatively relevant features of the political context to change in outlining different approximations of the good society in the *Politics*. These features include variations such as the level of education of the population and the conception of virtue promoted by the society's hegemonic political

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[8] On the other hand, it might be argued that Aristotle is concerned with an equivalent problem when he discusses the importance of proportional equality in avoiding civil discord (e.g. *EN* ; *Pol.*)

[9] In Z. Stemplowska, "What's Ideal About Ideal Theory," *Social Theory and Practice* 34, no. 3 (2008): 319-40.

[10] Ibid., 324.

[11] See Irwin (1999): 341 for an explanation of the role of right perception of particulars in practical sciences.

[12] There is a sense in which non-ideal theory defined according the Prof. Stemplowska's criteria could never be trans-historical or even trans-contextual, depending upon the specificity of the imperfections it identifies as normatively significant (i.e. if they are unique to the particular political context).

[13] Though we might, of course, disagree that the aspects of the theory which are *relevant* to us are genuine contributions to improving our ethical activity.

ideology which are normatively relevant for our own circumstances even if our political communities are of a vastly different character. Alternatively we might point to how *politikē* is framed with respect to theoretically identifying the good of human beings and implicitly encouraging a love of and motivation for that good in the reader. This good is defined at the theoretical and therefore general level by human biology. Its particular manifestation in actual lived activity is necessarily left unspecified for it could take myriad forms some of which are inconceivable theoretically or by the contextually embedded and therefore imaginatively restricted political philosopher.

To some degree this simultaneous use of ideal and non-ideal theory is unsurprising if Prof. Stemplowska is right in suggesting normative theories often display elements of both types.[14] The problem is that the sense in which *politikē* is normative appears distinct from the prescription-giving function upon which she focuses. Her observation that all normative theories by virtue of their normativity provide recommendations of some kind[15] is no doubt true. But *politikē* is action-guiding in its non-ideal guise—in its aspiration to improve the capacity of its students to live well in their imperfect situations—not by prescribing certain actions and proscribing others, but by recommending the cultivation of certain sorts of capacities necessary for acting well and by suggesting how one might go about cultivating them. The sense in which it is practical, in other words, is not by recommending an immediately possible course of action but by helping develop the ability to make good decisions in ethically salient situations, helping develop virtues.

This particular educative function is underlined by Julia Annas as a distinguishing feature of classical eudaimonist theories, a preoccupation which she contrasts with that of what she calls "modern moral philosophy." Ancient eudaimonism, she explains,

> is not based on the idea that morality is essentially punitive or corrective...It's leading notions are not those of obligation, duty and rule-following; instead of these 'imperative' notions it uses 'attractive' notions like those of goodness and worth. Ancient ethical theories do not assume that morality is essentially demanding, the only interesting question being, how much does it demand; rather, the moral point of view is seen as one that the agent will naturally come to accept in the course of a normal unrepressed development.[16]

This divergence seems manifest in our tendency to expect a moral theory to decide what is right and wrong for us to do and especially to help us solve particular moral dilemmas and hard cases. Ancient theories, however, do not live up to such expectations since they are not designed to do so. They assume, continues Annas, "that the moral agent internalizes and applies the moral theory to produce the correct answers to hard cases; but the answers themselves are not part of the theory."[17] It is the attempt to conceptualize and promote this sort of internalization which I take to be practical function of *politikē*.

§3. Macpherson's Project as *Politikē* [18]

Macpherson's normative project is analogous to *politikē* in two broad respects, one explicit the other implicit. Explicitly, as mentioned in the introduction, he understands himself to be delegitimizing the liberal theory of political justification which is supposed to contribute to the maintenance of human impediments. In this respect he hopes to make an intervention at the level of popular ideology as well as of political philosophy. But he seeks to do so not only by showing the liberal theory—as he believes it

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[14] Stemplowska (2008): 326

[15] Ibid., 323 f.n. 16

[16] J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (1993): 4

[17] Ibid., 6

[18] Much of the material for §3-4 draws upon R. A. Ballingall, "Power and Happiness: C.B. Macpherson's Overlooked Contribution" (unpublished M.Phil thesis submitted April, 2009 to the Dept. of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford).

exists in popular ideology—to violate certain ethical norms, but also by clarifying the conception of human flourishing upon which it relies and contrasting this conception with a more desirable alternative, what he calls "creative individualism."[19] In this respect Macpherson's normative project, like an Aristotelian practical science, is directed not only at improving our understanding, but also our competence in political activity, encouraging the student to internalize an alternative ethical standpoint without which the illegitimacy of certain norms is difficult to see. The implicit element of this similarity to *politikē* is the function this alternative conception of human flourishing must perform to be successful in this regard. Not only must students sufficiently internalize this alternative ethical standpoint to see the liberal theory as a historically contingent and therefore potentially dispensable theory, Macpherson's stated goal in his *Essays in Retrieval* project. They must also grasp how the ethical standpoint from which the liberal theory itself appears desirable also justifies an unnecessarily limited development of human capacities. A more detailed outline of Macpherson's normative project is helpful to give a sense of how his theory is analogous in these respects to Aristotle's *politikē*.

Macpherson takes as his object the so-called liberal theory of political justification. Such theories have, for him, three elements. Firstly, they are not only philosophical theories applied to political realities as models of an ideal arrangement. They are also, Macpherson believes, intrinsic to every political order, always present in one form or another on the level of "ideology."[20] This is because political order depends on citizens believing either that the present distribution of power and types of lives it affords is decent or that the cost of changing the political order to better match prevailing views in these areas is too high. If neither of these conditions is met, he maintains, the stability of the political order is seriously undermined.

Secondly, theories of political justification inevitably consist of a vision of the good society which in turn ultimately depends upon a conception of human nature. The first move is relatively uncontroversial. A theory of political justification relies on an account of the good society[21] with which to compare and judge prevailing conditions. The second requires some explanation. Macpherson believes that for a theory to make claims about the good society, it must invoke not only some notion of the human good—either of what it means for a human to live a full and flourishing life or more narrowly what constitutes good and bad human actions or behaviours—it must also make assumptions regarding the content of human nature, the former flowing from the latter. "Any ethical theory," he claims, "and therefore any justificatory political theory...must start from the assumption that there are specifically or uniquely human capacities different from or over and above, animal ones."[22] He defends this claim by arguing, with Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor, that it is an inevitable part of the language of value to make appeals, whether explicit or not, to a conception of human flourishing based on assumptions concerning the nature of human beings.[23]

An important qualification to this picture is that Macpherson does not see conceptions of human flourishing (and the conceptions of human nature upon which they draw) only as competitors in an attempt at giving an account that is objectively true. Historical circumstances constrain the kinds of conceptions that will appear plausible. Moreover, they also delimit the kinds of flourishing that are possible for the kinds of human beings they produce. The kinds of flourishing that are open to us under

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[19] Term first proposed by A. MacIntyre in "On Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval of C.B. Macpherson," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 6, (1976): 178 which Macpherson subsequently adopted.

[20] Macpherson (1973):157

[21] For Macpherson, an account of the 'just' society is also a claim about the good society

[22] Ibid., 53

[23] I. Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" in P. Laslett, ed., *Philosophy, Politics and Society: A Collection* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962): 1-33; C. Taylor, "Neutrality in Political Science" in M. Martin & L.C. McIntyre eds., *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (London: MIT Press, 1994): 547-569.

late capitalism in Western societies are very different than those of pre-capitalist Europe or South-East Asia, for instance. While meditation formed and continues to form an important component of conceptions of flourishing for a variety of traditions in South-East Asia, the demands of market society produce human beings who *tend* to find little value in such practices, who are unreceptive to the benefits they provide. It stands to reason, therefore, that given the practical impossibility of certain forms of life under certain historical conditions, philosophical conceptions of flourishing produced under those conditions will be similarly constrained. This proviso captures what Macpherson means in describing "the problem of human needs" (i.e. the nature of human beings and their flourishing) as both "ontological and historical."[24] It is historical in the sense just outlined, that human nature is malleable and so theories attempting to define it are always limited in scope by the kind of human beings they encounter; ontological in the sense that there remains something essential to human beings enabling the identification of better and worse conceptions of their flourishing as they are made and make themselves available.

Finally, Macpherson assumes that all conceptions of human nature can be divided into what he calls "essentially human capacities."[25] These correspond to types of activity emblematic of essentially human purposes, i.e. those which human beings are exclusively capable of performing and which are inscribed with inherent value. Since Macpherson maintains that human nature is historical as well as ontological, essentially human capacities, though based on an account of the human essence, are dependent on how prevailing historical conditions shape that essence. Consequently, as historical conditions change, new capacities will become recognizable and demand our attention.

The conviction that every political theory making claims about the good society *must* also make claims about the nature of human beings prompts Macpherson to actually define the object of political theory as the analysis, critique, and promulgation of these claims. "The adequacy of a political theory is to be assessed by the penetration of its analysis of human nature," he declares.[26] Given that human nature is historical as well as ontological, this means that a "penetrating analysis" perceives as many essentially human capacities as possible under present historical conditions and given present 'ethical' knowledge, that is, knowledge of different ways of life and social conditions in which different capacities are given opportunity to develop. Macpherson thus provides an overarching moral imperative to political theory in the form of grasping as accurately as possible essentially human capacities and in promoting their development, that is, the internalization of the ethical position most able to recognize them.

This brings us back to theories of political justification. Insofar as these theories depend on conceptions of the good society which are in turn based upon analyses of human nature, Macpherson believes their plausibility ultimately relies on the accuracy of this last element, whether explicitly elucidated or not. Thus all theories of political justification, according to the argument, should ultimately hold the maximum development of essentially human capacities as their central condition for the justifiability of a political order. If a given society develops in such a way as to enable its members to conceptualize possibilities for developing new capacities or already apparent ones in a fuller fashion, then the political order in that society, to the extent that it does not facilitate these possibilities, is unjustified. Indeed, this is precisely what Macpherson believes has occurred in liberal democracies of the late twentieth century.

The market society characteristic of Western capitalism that began to emerge in the seventeenth century supported and was supported by a corresponding theory of political justification that Macpherson believes to be *no longer* ethically defensible. He calls this theory "possessive individualism"

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[24] Macpherson 1977a
[25] Macpherson (1973): 53
[26] Ibid., 202

(PI), describing it as a type of liberalism which posits human flourishing in terms of the satisfaction of market preferences and conceives of human beings as bundles of infinitely desirous appetites seeking satisfaction through commodity exchange.[27] Following Marx, he believes this theory satisfied the condition of justifiability for centuries as it supported an economic regime of rapid material expansion with the result that, eventually, a greater proportion of the population of the political orders in which it was promulgated had the opportunity to develop their capacities (as conceived by PI).[28] However, as the social surplus grew larger, more "essential" human capacities could conceivably be developed in a greater number of persons and the theory began to lose its power of justification. PI was challenged by Millian liberals and socialists in the nineteenth century who sought to affirm a notion of human essence encompassing such capacities, based on the maximization of individual human powers, "that is, their potential for using and developing their uniquely human capacities."[29] Macpherson believes this new conception of human essence, what he calls "creative individualism," came to exist alongside PI as an alternative and more defensible liberal theory of political justification. He associates its emergence with the recognition of the legitimate demand to "create, exert, shape and transform, rather than simply react passively to concrete social and environmental conditions or accept the boundaries given by [our] psychological proclivities."[30] Human capacities themselves take on a different meaning under this *creative* individualism, being more fragile and requiring development rather than constituting pre-existing desires and abilities. What turns out to be a higher-order capacity to creatively self-develop one's lower-order capacities also changes the subject matter of these lower-order capacities. Whereas under PI these are limited to what can be expressed in the commodity form, creative individualism emphasizes capacities as all attributes that are distinctively human. "The [capacities] for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic creating or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and sometimes, for religious experience"[31] are offered as tentative candidates in this regard. The problem is that the social relations and institutions of liberal societies have remained coherently justifiable only on possessive individualist grounds even as PI has seemed increasingly problematic. Consequently, both liberal theory and society have become unstable, the existing social arrangements being profoundly unjust given an appropriate articulation of the defensible version of the theory as it exists as a philosophy of justification.

As I said, Macpherson believes the primary task of the political theorist is to hasten the demise of such outdated theories of political justification both by positing alternatives and, especially, actively undermining the conceptions of human nature upon which they depend. Consequently, he sees the "essays in retrieval" of *Democratic Theory* (1973) not only as a philosophical contribution to a theory of political justification based on a more defensible conception of the human essence in the form of creative individualism. They are also a political contribution to the project of undermining the denuded conception in PI which still enjoys a 'natural,' common-sense status whereby its normative significance goes unrecognized. In this respect "he was intent on showing our self-conception as infinitely desirous to be time bound and unnecessary."[32] By demonstrating not only the debt owed by the prevailing liberal theory to a particular conception of human beings but also the plausibility of equivalent alternatives, Macpherson hopes PI can be seen for what it is, just another theory of human needs requiring philosophical justification, one that can be rejected if found inadequate.

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[27] Ibid., 199

[28] Ibid., 37; Lindsay (1996):60

[29] Macpherson (1973): 4. Macpherson calls this a "developmental" conception of power.

[30] Lindsay (1996): 22

[31] Macpherson (1973): 4

[32] Lindsay (1996): 60

§4. Human Nature and Individualism in Macpherson's 'Practical' Science

§4.1 *The Case Against Human Nature in a 'Practical' Theory*

This aspiration to encourage individuals to adopt an ethical standpoint whereby the liberal theory of political justification dependent upon PI could be properly understood and hence more easily dismissed is shared by two of Macpherson's critics, Virginia Held and Steven Lukes. However, Held and Lukes maintain that, notwithstanding this aspiration, Macpherson's theory betrays a pernicious form of liberal individualism of the very kind it is supposed to exculpate in the name of saving liberalism as a defensible utopian project. This fatal flaw, they argue, renders his theory incapable of adequately conceptualizing power in the form of what Held calls "internal impediments"[33] or what Lukes describes as "three dimensional power."[34] For both critics, this sort of power can be defined as the "stunting, diminishing, and undermining [of an individual's] powers of judgment and..falsifying, distorting and reducing [his] self-perceptions and self-understanding."[35] For my purposes here, I assume that the practical aspiration Macpherson shares with Aristotelian *politikē* includes helping students internalize an ethical standpoint adept in identifying this sort of power.

The individualism which is supposed to prevent Macpherson's theory from accomplishing this goal is identified by Held and Lukes as a failure to appreciate the social nature of the human capacities Macpherson hopes to develop.[36] Macpherson's aim, they point out, is to maximize each individual's ability to creatively (i.e. independently) develop her capacities when in fact that is impossible. Because the good (in terms of a possible mode of developing one's capacities) can only be conceptualized through the possibilities made available by a given culture and social milieu, creative self-development is only meaningful if understood as a form of culture and type of society. It is thus more useful to describe human flourishing itself as a type of society rather than activities in which individuals ought to engage. This position, typical of communitarian authors, is often referred to as holism. Charles Taylor, perhaps its best known contemporary proponent, describes it as an ontological claim—that is, one concerning "the factors [one] will invoke to account for social life."[37] Specifically, holism is a claim about the nature of the common good, one that sees it as "constituted out of individual goods [but with a] remainder."[38] This remainder, Taylor explains, is the good of the community as such apart from the good of individuals. It is the good not only of me and you, but of "us."[39]

Central to this argument is the idea that only a holist conception of the human good can remain sufficiently alive to internal impediments. In categorically condemning individualist alternatives, which would by definition see the human good in terms of the development of individually conceptualized capacities, Held and Lukes imply individualism needlessly risks reproducing internal impediments. More specifically, recognizing internal impediments depends upon recognizing conceptions of human

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[33] V. Held, 1993a;b

[34] S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

[35] Ibid., 123-24

[36] "As I interpret him," writes Held, "Macpherson values collective enterprises only instrumentally, and in terms of the contribution they make to individual self-development." Once individuals are free of impediments, "they will not be defined inherently by any other social group or by ties to any other persons...There seems to be no way, on Macpherson's scales, to appreciate the value of shared, relational activity in itself," V. Held (1993a): 147,49. For Lukes this is represented by what he calls "abstract individualism," a pernicious tendency for seeing "the individual ('man') abstractly as an atom whose nature ('capacities') is independent of the relations in which he is involved," S. Lukes (1979): 146.

[37] C. Taylor, "Cross Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," In N.L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989): 159

[38] Ibid., 166

[39] Ibid., 167

nature—and the visions of the human good built upon them—as socially constructed.[40] I follow Will Kymlicka in calling this position the social thesis.[41] An individualist conception of human nature, however, appears to exclude certain features of human beings from being understood in this way. On the one hand, it seems to imply an essential 'core' nature to human beings, since it asserts that, regardless of social/historical context, the development of essentially human capacities is a necessary condition of human flourishing. On the other, it values a self-centred ethical standpoint incapable of giving proper weight to and hence recognizing stultifying forms of relations with others. Indeed, there is a sense in which the very language of human nature, at least in the eudaimonist guise it takes in Macpherson, is inherently individualistic in the sense Held and Lukes criticize. It is difficult to see how we can speak of human nature without invoking essentialisms of some kind and even harder to understand a conception of human flourishing built upon this language which makes no self-centred appeals.

Yet neither Held nor Lukes considers the possibility that an individualist conception of human nature can retain the sensitivity to social conditioning they insist is so crucial for helping individuals recognize and overcome internal impediments. Instead, the idea that human beings have an essential nature is assumed to imply what Lukes calls the 'onion theory' of the self, stipulating that human beings have an essential core nature unalterable by social conditioning and accessible by peeling away the layers of historical context around individuals.[42] Since the social thesis holds that such an ahistorical core nature is impossible—all aspects of humans being subject to social conditioning—this "abstract individualism" will posit as universal some features of human beings and the conceptions of flourishing they might hold when they are in fact contingent. The individuals making this mistake fail to grasp the extent to which they could adopt different conceptions of flourishing and develop their different capacities in different directions and are therefore subject to internal impediments. However the argument depends on the assumption that Macpherson's essentialist view of human nature necessarily precludes him from seeing universal human attributes as historically conditioned, committing him instead to the 'onion theory' of the self. That this assumption is controversial is a possibility Lukes does not entertain. The issue, then, is not whether the onion theory of the self could overcome these difficulties for it seems obvious that it could not. Rather, the controversy rests on whether an essentialist conception of human nature can accommodate the view that all features of human beings are in some sense socially affected.

Secondly, the self-centred ethical standpoint Macpherson advocates is taken to imply egoism, where the former is the idea that human flourishing consists in *individual* excellences[43] and the later the disinterest in the welfare of others. Egoism for Held and Lukes is assumed to reflect this disinterest because it sees individual excellences as plural (because excellence is taken to be whatever is in my particular self-interest) and antagonistic. In order to avoid egoism as an impediment in one's conception of flourishing, Held and Lukes demand that we see flourishing as compossibly realizable between individuals, realizable without antagonism. They thereby draw the conclusion that flourishing must consist in *collective* excellences that champion mutual concern based on a common good. Yet this is all

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[40] Lukes describes this recognition as "autonomy" which "will be reduced to the extent that [one] is unaware of the determinants of his behaviour and to the extent that the alternatives before him are restricted." It can thus be thought of as "self-determined deciding and choosing on the basis of consciousness of one's self and one's situation" Lukes (2005): 128, 157.

[41] W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*. (Oxford: OUP, 2003): 245

[42] Lukes 1979; 2006

[43] In Macpherson's case, an individual's ability to creatively develop her essentially human capacities with a maximum degree of her own input (i.e. independently).

assumed. The possibility that a self-centred ethical standpoint might not necessarily imply egoism is never entertained.

These issues are enormously difficult. My intention in raising them is only to show that Held and Lukes' rejection of individualism as the basis for theorizing internal impediments relies on assumed answers to each of them. Individualism in the context of this debate is a view about the nature of human flourishing. It amounts to a rejection of the social thesis that human capacities are developed through social institutions rather than within individuals based on two reasons. On the one hand, its commitment to an essentialist conception of human nature is taken to imply the 'onion theory' of the self. On the other, its promotion of developing individual excellences is thought to imply egoism. But the overarching issue here is not whether a theory of internal impediments must recognize the social thesis in order to look in the right places for sources of stultifying conceptions of the good that individuals can come to hold. Rather it is whether these features of an individualist understanding of the good preclude its adherent from seeing the social thesis in full scope. My suspicion is that a prime motivation these authors have in rejecting a Macphersonian framework for internal impediments has more to do with their view that one must choose between individualism with these consequences and holism without them than it does with Macpherson's actual individualist commitments. Since an individualist conception of human flourishing does not have to display these features, as will now be shown, this motivation can be put to rest.

§4.2 *The Aristotelian Counterexample*

It is widely agreed that Aristotle's account of the relationship between human flourishing and community draws on an essentialist conception of human nature and an self-centred ethical standpoint yet also, either despite or as a result of this, displays a keen appreciation for the extent to which an individual is shaped by the nature of the community in which she lives. Aristotle thus provides an example of a theory that is individualist in the two senses implied by Held and Lukes without also rejecting the thrust of the social thesis. However interpreters are divided on the question of the theoretical device whence this virtue comes. Communitarian and civic republican authors such as Alisdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor invoke Aristotle to support their arguments about the social nature of human beings. They argue that fully grasping this social nature (in both a descriptive and normative sense) requires a holist prioritizing of a collective identity in constituting individual identities (and the correlative priority of the common good to individual goods), something to which they believe Aristotle is firmly committed.[44] It is thus Aristotle's holist conception of community and its role in human flourishing that, despite his other 'individualistic' views, ensures his deep grasp of humanity's sociability.

This view is vigorously contested by many Aristotelians, prominently by Fred D. Miller Jr., Martha Nussbaum, and Bernard Yack. They maintain that Aristotle is what Miller calls a "moderate individualist" who, despite the fact that he realizes human flourishing is inextricably dependent on appropriate social forms, values those forms only insofar as they promote the flourishing of individuals.[45] They further claim that Aristotle's conception of the good community which enables that flourishing does not depend on a collective conception of the good to be held by its citizens. Thus they conclude that Aristotle does not depend on holism in either a descriptive or normative sense for his account of the social nature of human beings. I believe a similar position concerning the relationship of community to human

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[44] A. MacIntyre, *After virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Note Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Taylor 1989.

[45] F.D. Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995): 191-251; M.C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000); B. Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal: Community, Justice, and Conflict in Aristotelian Political Thought* (London: University of California Press, 1993).

flourishing can be attributed to Macpherson, leaving room for his framework, despite the fact that it is individualistic, to appreciate the social nature of human beings so necessary to an account of internal impediments.

I now proceed to outline Aristotle's essentialist conception of human nature and self-centred account of human flourishing arguing that neither does the former entail Lukes' 'onion theory' of the self nor the latter egoism. I also show that Macpherson's individualism is an analogue to Aristotle's in each of these respects. This is followed by an exegesis of the holist-individualist debate amongst contemporary Aristotelians with the aim only of demonstrating the credibility of the moderate individualist interpretation in order to meet the objection that Aristotle's conception of flourishing grasps the social thesis regardless of his individualist commitments because of a holist understanding of the common good. Aristotle is helpful in meeting Held and Lukes' arguments against Macpherson for a number of reasons. Firstly, since their case is based on the assumption that all forms of individualism which display the elements we identified in §4.1 fail to grasp the social thesis, a counter-example will suffice as refutation. Secondly, Aristotle has a much more developed theory of human flourishing with a far greater number of commentators than that upon which Macpherson builds his normative theory. It is easier to elucidate the counter-example with the kind of detail Aristotle affords. Thirdly, a major controversy amongst Aristotelian commentators centers on whether his undisputed grasp of the social thesis is due to individualist or holist aspects of his thought. Those arguing for the individualist interpretation provide further detail to a plausible counter-example. Finally, and most importantly, Macpherson's conception of human flourishing evidently borrows a great deal from Aristotle, to the extent that, though less well-developed, it displays precisely those features that enable Aristotle to provide the counter-example.

§4.3 *The Charge of Asocial Essentialism*

We have seen that a necessary assumption in Lukes' argument against Macpherson is that an essentialist conception of human nature is ultimately and necessarily naive about the extent to which human beings are shaped by their social context. But Aristotle, widely thought to have an excellent grasp of precisely this matter, also employs a variant of essentialism. This is accomplished because Aristotle's essentialism transcends the dichotomy Lukes constructs between an ahistorical, unchanging core nature and a self whose nature is entirely contingent on historical circumstance. If essentialism, broadly speaking, is the view that human life has certain defining features, Lukes takes the very positing of these features to imply a perspective, as Aristotle exemplifies, that they do not have to display. That perspective, the so called 'onion theory' of the self, stipulates that what is unaltered by social/historical context is what is essential to a human being. Since, whatever else is true, we are by nature social beings for whom everything is shaped by social/historical context, the onion theory of the self is false.

Aristotle's view is most simply that even that which is most essential to human beings is shaped by historical/social context. This takes some unpacking to appreciate. Firstly, what is essential to human beings is, for Aristotle, a teleological question. Like all things that exist by nature, human beings have a characteristic function that defines us as the kind of thing we are and which is good for us to perform.[46] That which performs its characteristic function well is said to be *aretē*, translated variously as excellent or virtuous. Any 'natural' substance or human artifice that has a function can be *aretē*[47] so the concept is best appreciated in tools such as hammers or simpler organisms like trees. A particular species of tree, for instance, will, under ideal environmental circumstances for which it is best adapted, grow into its fullest potential, flourish as the kind of thing that it is. Under these conditions, we would say that the tree is exhibiting its virtues, those characteristics best displayed under these conditions that make the

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[46] *NE* 1168a6-9; *Pol.* 1253a23-25
[47] *NE* 1098a7-20, *Physics (Ph.)* 195a23-25

tree distinctive. If, however, it is planted in a climate and soil-type for which it is ill adapted, its growth will be stunted, it will be more vulnerable to disease, and will likely die prematurely. In a similar sense, humans can be conceived as beings who flourish as the type of things we are under particular 'environmental' conditions. Our complicated natures, of course, greatly complicate both what this flourishing involves and which environmental factors are most conducive to its enablement, but the general idea is not hard to grasp. The human virtues are those traits whose full development constitutes human flourishing and their content depends on how we conceive of our characteristic function. The human essence is thus being defined both descriptively and normatively. That which most defines us as the types of beings we are is also that which is best for us to perform.

Secondly, Aristotle is preoccupied with developing and describing character traits disposing one to excellent activity rather than with formulating a procedure to reach correct decisions about excellent activity in particular situations. One feature of this preoccupation is what is often called the doctrine of the mean. Aristotle defines the excellent exercise of characteristically human activity in terms of a variety of virtues whose appropriate articulation is found in a mean between excess and deficiency, usually of some characteristic activity. Alternatively, the *aretē* individual is she who aims at intermediates within the possible range of human activities (in the descriptive, not teleological, sense). What is striking about Aristotle's thought here is the degree of open-endedness with which he regards excellent human activity. The virtue of temperance, for example, is never defined as a general rule or decision-making mechanism to be applied to particular situations, as is often the case with modern moral philosophy.[48] Insofar as it captures an aspect of human excellence, it does so by describing a type of activity—in this case felt anger or passion—to which is applied the doctrine of the mean. The temperate person thus aims at intermediate activity with regard to feeling and expressing anger and passion. Aristotle leaves the working out of hard cases to individuals. His concern is with the cultivation of character appropriate to making those decisions, a habituation enabling ourselves to reason properly and to listen to reason.

More controversially, some have argued that this preoccupation with the development of character as opposed to a decision-making procedure similarly applies to Aristotle's conception of political justice. Usually his well-defined conception of the human good is thought to extend directly to a well-defined conception of the good society—typically the utopian regime of books VII-VIII of the *Politics*. Nussbaum, for instance, maintains that Aristotle equates political justice with the good of the political community and the good of this community with the good of its composite individuals. Thus she believes Aristotle derives from the identification of the nature of the good for human beings a specific account of how the political community should be organized even though he never specifies a list of human goods or a guide to authoritative standards of justice.[49] This view is challenged by interpreters for whom Aristotle's reluctance in this regard is no mere accidental omission but rather indicative of his more central motivation of ensuring the rule of the virtuous.[50] The argument here holds that Aristotle believes the activity of citizenship, ruling and being ruled in turn with one's relative equals in virtue,[51] embodies the political articulation of the human good. Just as the cultivation of excellent character preoccupies Aristotle's ethical thought, so facilitating the application of excellent character to participation in public life illustrates his conception of the common good. The distribution of goods, the

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[48] Annas (1993): 443

[49] M.C. Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defence of Aristotelian Essentialism," *Political Theory* 20 (1992): 202-46; see also Galston 1980

[50] See D. Charles, "Perfectionism in Aristotle's Political Theory: Reply to Martha Nussbaum," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, VI (1988): 185-206; Yack (1993): 166-74

[51] See *Pol.* III 1275a23-24 and "political rule" 1277b7-16, 1283b41-84a3

defensibility of particular institutional orders, and the establishment of terms of fairness beyond supporting this activity is a matter for those citizens not philosophers to determine.

> Justice thus represents, for Aristotle, a disposition to seek and promote states of affairs in which citizens will find some common advantage rather than a disposition to identify and apply supposedly true knowledge of the common good. Knowledge of the human good is far from irrelevant to identifying these states of affairs, but it does not provide us with a target to hit in our assessments of the justice of laws and public acts. It acts instead as a limiting condition on the choices we should make. We need to know something about the nature of a good life in order to avoid political choices that would make that life impossible—for example, by eliminating the private control of personal property that is a necessary precondition for the virtue of liberality (*Pol*. 1263a-b). But within these limits, knowledge of the human good does not yield us determinate standards of justice. [52]

Standards of justice, Yack suggests instead, should be based on the particular circumstances of the political community in which they are sought. This is because, as we will see him argue contra holist interpretations of Aristotle, the political community exists to facilitate the training necessary for leading a virtuous life.[53] Though the ideal regime will do this best, a regime that maintains political activity for its citizens will also contribute to that end. Since maintaining political activity requires compromises and accommodation to the particular claims made by the unique set of competing interests in different political communities, and since political activity embodies the formulation of principles of justice suitable to regulating these particular claims, Aristotle, Yack maintains, leaves the working out of standards of justice to citizens. Shrinking from pre-determining their philosophical content thus also opens the possibility for a wide variety of regimes to be capable of promoting human flourishing.

Together, these two features enable an essentialism that, while attentive to how the organization of common life shapes the possibilities for individual flourishing, does so without having to rely on a pre-social conception of the self. Though Aristotle believes human beings have an essence embodied in our defining activity (the excellent exercise of our rational capacity), that essence is inevitably realized in unique ways. Excellence or virtue is composed of multiple components (the virtues). These represent particular manifestations of a learned ability to have one's self listen to reason as a result of which one chooses right action as a mean between extremes of the particular type of activity in question, such as the expression of anger. Since this process will be conducted under myriad different circumstances, the corresponding virtuous activity will also always be contextually tailored. The identification of the human essence, which is defined as virtuous activity, is therefore inseparable from how that activity is uniquely enacted by each virtuous individual in their particular social, cultural, or historic context and according to the random circumstances with which they are confronted. Instead of implying a pre-social natural core to humanity, Aristotle's essentialism embodies an account of excellent character that seeks to be objective but whose concrete instantiation requires individual definition. The courageous person thus embodies a component of the human essence in her courageous actions which are made possible by her excellent character. But to define her excellence apart from these actions, apart from that excellent activity, is to lose sight of it altogether.

Furthermore, Aristotle's teleological conception of the human essence does not describe what is human in terms of a lowest common denominator as the 'onion theory' of the self would suggest. To say that something is essentially human is, for him, to say something about what human beings are *and* what they ought to be. Insofar as a particular capacity or virtue is essentially human, it is a component of our defining function or excellence and hence an expression of our fullest development. Yet the only capacity he defines in any kind of ahistorical, concrete manner is the overarching ability emergent from a character disposed to moral virtue, what he calls *phronēsis* or "practical wisdom."[54] *Phronēsis* can thus

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[52] Yack (1993):171
[53] Ibid., 170
[54] As usually translated. Irwin unconventionally uses 'prudence.'

be considered a sort of super-essentially human capacity since it describes the need for every human being to negotiate the myriad circumstances with which they are confronted and themselves work out the particular manifestations of virtue in these particular situations and given their own dispositions, developed or inherited. Aristotle's essentialism, then, is highly contextualized even as it defines what a human being is since in doing so it suggests what a human being ought to be without pre-determining the exact nature of the outcome.

Finally, if Aristotle's conception of the common good is as politically open-ended as Charles and Yack maintain, and if the common good is truly being defined in terms of the good of the community's individual citizens, then Aristotle's conception of the good society will also be tremendously flexible. For as long as that community enables virtuous activity, though it might not be perfect, and though it might have to abide by strange laws necessitated by its particular competing claims in order to sustain political participation and appropriate civic education, it deserves the commendation 'good'. In forgoing the philosophic determination of universal standards of justice, Aristotle enables not only his conception of the human good in individuals but in the common life upon which the good of individuals depends to have an equivalent degree of flexibility. Aristotle thus provides a strong counterexample to the claim that individualism (in the sense of an essentialist conception of the human good) implies an account of the human good defined abstractly outside of social contexts.

In a general way, Macpherson's essentialist individualism displays both these features with the result that he too understands human beings to have an essence that is nevertheless shaped by cultural/historical context. One aspect of Macpherson's conception of human flourishing with which Lukes takes issues is his apparent reluctance to define which capacities are 'essentially human' and what is entailed in their development. It seems to Lukes that Macpherson values the development of any human capacity and thus has no criteria to distinguish between real and false goods.[55] However this criticism proves unfounded because his essentialism is teleological. We are now in a position to better grasp what that means. To define the human essence teleologically is to define it in terms of our characteristic activity, which for Aristotle—and as it turns out for Macpherson—is the exercise of our capacity for rationality. It is also to inscribe that activity with normative value. Thus to say something is essentially human is to say that is a component of a good life for the kind of thing we are. That is not to say that human beings do not engage in other activities or that other forms of activity are not also requisite to the good life. Rather, it is to remark that without our characteristic activity, life is not lived in a flourishing manner. Thus Macpherson does not define as essentially human capacities such as the ability to inflict terrible pain on others or to eat and drink but "the capacities for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic creating or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and sometimes, for religious experience."[56] To say that a capacity is "essentially human," therefore, is not to say either that it is a pre-social characteristic of all human beings which we exhibit naturally or an attribute necessary to sustain basic human life. Instead it describes a conception of excellent human activity requiring cultivation and the application of skill and practice to develop.

Moreover, like Aristotle, Macpherson is chiefly concerned that we be equipped with the ability to direct our lives under the guidance of reason, preferably our own,[57] rather than with developing a procedure to direct good behaviour. Just as *phronēsis* encompasses a meta-virtue for Aristotle, referring to an ability to maximize excellent activity under various particular circumstances, so Macpherson believes that "activity in pursuit of a conscious rational purpose" is what defines the creative capacity in

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[55] Though, of course, Lukes is sceptical of the very enterprise of defining any capacities as 'essential.'

[56] Macpherson (1973): 4

[57] It is, of course, well known that Aristotle believes some human beings are not properly human in the sense that they either do not possess a rational capacity (slaves) or they lack the emotional equipment necessary to have their souls listen to reason (women). Macpherson does not share this view.

human beings he seeks to maximize.[58] This is what Lindsay calls, "the idea of purposive action" which he believes Macpherson, following Marx and Mill, derives ultimately from Aristotle. Essentially this is the thought that human flourishing is defined by activity rather than sensation or pleasure alone and that good activity for human beings requires motivation and guidance from the individual exuding it. "Like Aristotle," he explains, "Macpherson has difficulty conceiving of any activity as being as valid as any other. And like him, the crucial distinction between the valid and the invalid is made on the basis of whether purpose and direction lie behind action, or whether, in Macpherson's language, we have no further end than simply the maximization of utility."[59] Though Macpherson does not elaborate a moral psychology as Aristotle does to habituate our selves to listen to reason and be attracted to noble activity in different situations, his emphasis on purposive action being creative fits well with the open-ended flexibility of *phronēsis*.

Similarly, Macpherson believes the context in which one seeks to develop one's capacities greatly shapes what that development will actually constitute. As we saw in §3, for him, the human essence is both ontological and historical, by which he means that, because human beings *are* the activities in which they engage, the forms of activity available under given historical conditions will constrain the creative application of purposive action. In other words the human essence is something that is realizable only in living and since forms of life are constrained contextually so too will be the human essence. In all these ways Macpherson shares Aristotle's contextually sensitive essentialism that transcends the dichotomy Lukes draws between an ahistorical, unchanging core nature and a self whose nature is entirely contingent on historical circumstance

§4.4 *The Charge of Egoism*

Another element as necessary of Held's argument against Macpherson as of Lukes' is the assumption that a self-centred ethical standpoint characteristic of perfectionist theories implies egoism. And again, Aristotle provides a powerful counterexample. The assumption here is not that perfectionism itself, the idea that in at least some sense there is a single good for human beings, is necessarily egoistic. Rather it is perfectionism applied to individuals apart from what is good 'for us' that Held and Lukes find suspicious. Macpherson's purported aim of maximizing the power of each individual to creatively develop her essentially human capacities independently and based on a conception of the good life *for an individual* is the target here. The claim that this approach is egoistic and hence cannot appreciate certain social dimensions of human capacities comprises two related points. Firstly, it is egoistic in that it cannot value Held's "relational activities"[60] in themselves as all value is being derived from the needs of individuals. Since valuing relational activities in themselves is necessary to value the good of others, the approach fails to accommodate this crucial dimension of morality. Secondly, it is egoistic in the sense that prioritizing the good of individuals is taken to undermine the ability to value the objective standards of right upon which Lukes' preferred collective perfectionism is based.[61] This is because prioritizing the good of individuals is assumed to require moral subjectivism, as value is being derived from individual affirmation rather than rational discourse.

As with the accusations levelled at Macpherson's essentialism, these charges reach conclusions only required by a particular kind of individualist 'perfectionism' which they grossly conflate. They hold false premises that an Aristotelian perfectionism quickly undermines. To see this it is helpful to follow Christopher Toner in distinguishing between self-centredness and egoism, where the former is the view

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[58] C.B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corboration,1965): 54
[59] Lindsay (1996): 23
[60] See V. Held (1993a):149 and §4.1 f.n. 33
[61] See Lukes, 2005 and *Individualism* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2006) where he discusses his view that moral truths are accessible through a rationality independent of any reference to a philosophic anthropology.

that one should place one's own excellence at the centre of one's life and the latter that one should care only that one's own life goes well, caring for the well-being of others only insofar as they contribute to this project. If these still seem quite similar it is because Toner holds egoism as a pernicious species of self-centredness where aiming at living well becomes construed with caring only for oneself.[62] Aristotle, it is widely held, subscribes to the self-centred rather than egoist position, though some commentators, including Toner, argue that he is not even self-centred. To show this in the context of the arguments by Held and Lukes, it is necessary to demonstrate that the self-centred position does not entail moral subjectivism and accommodates valuing the good of others.

The first issue is easily demonstrable in Aristotle. No interpretation of which I am aware denies that he is concerned both with the good of individuals and with an objective account of flourishing. But since Aristotle seems such an obvious counter-example, Lukes' apparent position here deserves closer scrutiny. The first thing to appreciate is why Lukes believes moral subjectivism is egoist. Moral subjectivism, what he calls "ethical individualism," is described as "a view of the nature of morality as essentially individual...this may be seen as having taken the form of ethical egoism, according to which the sole moral object of the individual's action is his own benefit. Thus the various versions of self-interest ethics, from Hobbes onwards, maintained that one should seek to secure one's own good, not that of society as a whole or of other individuals."[63] Ethical individualism is contrasted with "objectivist ethical views, according to which the content of moral values and principles and the criteria governing moral judgements are not open to choice but are given."[64] Lukes thus considers ethical individualism subjectivist in the sense that it leaves the determination of moral norms to individual discretion, though he allows for variations in its extent. Since he also takes such a view to reduce the value of the good of others to a mere facilitation of one's own good, he believes it is also egoist.

Now, as we have seen, although Macpherson posits a conception of the good as objective, he (like Aristotle) leaves its specification largely to individual discretion. Moreover (again like Aristotle), he subscribes to a self-centered ethical perspective that encourages individuals to organize their lives around their own excellence. Insofar as these theorists display these commitments, Lukes' can plausibly fit them into his scheme in the following way. A conception of the good is egoist when it is a type of ethical individualism (moral subjectivism). Self-centred ethical theories such as Macpherson's and Aristotle's utilize conceptions of the good of this type. Therefore self-centred theories such as theirs are also egoist. So while Aristotle appears to be a committed objectivist, Lukes' argument would have us believe that in the relevant respects he is an ethical individualist because he provides individuals with too much discretion over the determination of moral norms and makes those norms dependent on the chosen goods of individuals.

If this is indeed part of what Lukes has in mind in claiming that individualistic conceptions of the good undermine a defensible account of internal impediments, Aristotle still provides a clear counter-example. He is indeed an "ethical individualist" if by that Lukes means he subscribes to a self-centred conception of the good. Yet Aristotle has a self-centred conception that neither values the chosen goods of individuals equally simply for being chosen nor reduces the value of the goods of others to an instrument of one's own good. A position that held that conceptions of the good which are individualist (in the sense of being self-centred) are as a result committed to these views would conflate two very different types of self-centredness, one which is much more vulnerable to the charge of egoism and subjectivism than the other. These are utilitarianism and eudaimonism.[65]

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[62] C. Toner, "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics," *Philosophy* 81 (2006): 596

[63] Lukes (1973): 99

[64] Ibid., 106

[65] From the Greek e*udaimonia* usually translated as human flourishing or the good life, more rarely and inaccurately as 'happiness.' Translated literally, it means to have a good *daimon* or spirit, suggesting a life of good

Whereas the utilitarian defines the good only as that which produces pleasure in the agent, eudaimonism holds that the good lies in forms of activity (which includes a concept of pleasure). Though utilitarianism is not necessarily self-centred—the good might be defined as prioritizing the production of pleasure in others—one of its more influential variants, embodied in the classical economic conception of self-interest, combines a priority of self-satisfaction with a second order subjectivist conception of the good. The good is objectively defined as that which produces pleasure in the agent, subjectively as whatever produces that pleasure. Eudaimonism, in contrast, is a set of ethical theories which, broadly speaking, ask us to focus on living good lives. In Aristotle, though *eudaimonia* asks each of us to determine the right course of action in particular situations, he provides us with a blueprint for human excellence in terms of activity and the type of character such activity requires. Pleasure, which plays an important role in his ethical theory too, is defined by the activity with which it is associated rather than as a single, commensurable sensation.

> Since activities differ in degrees of decency and badness, and some are choiceworthy, some to be avoided, some neither, the same is true of pleasures; for each activity has its own proper pleasure. Hence the pleasure proper to an excellent activity is decent, and the one proper to a bad activity is vicious; for, similarly, appetites for fine things are praiseworthy and appetites for shameful things are blameworthy.[66]

It is these activities which are scrutinized, some deemed constitutive of human flourishing such as contemplation, political participation, and moral judgment, others emblematic of a life unfitting for a human being to live such as thoughtlessness, lack of self-control or self-rule, asceticism, and even manual labour. We are asked to develop a taste for the pleasures corresponding to the former activities and a repulsion to the latter rather than assume that any activity which produces pleasure is a *prima facie* good. So while Aristotle's conception of the good is self-centred in that it asks us to direct our lives towards our own excellence, even to the extent of choosing how excellence in a particular activity ought to be manifested in a particular situation, he is no subjectivist on the matter of which activities, broadly speaking, constitute the human good. Aristotle, then, provides a counterexample to the charge that individualist perfectionism (in the sense of a self-centred conception of *the* good of human beings) implies subjectivism when it comes to the application of moral judgement.

However there is still the charge against individualist (self-centred) perfectionism that it is egoist in failing to properly value others. To begin with, we can observe that the additional premise required by Held's argument that relational activities must be valued in themselves in order to value the good of others is plainly false. An important part of valuing others is surely valuing them as particular individuals rather than only for their contribution to relationships or the common good *en masse*. It might be true that some component of valuing others is exclusively captured by valuing them through the common good, however it is certainly true that one can care deeply for the interest of another person singled out from others. The difficulty of the charge is that self-centered perfectionism might be necessarily egoist. Such a claim is often made by those influenced by variants of Christian and Kantian moral theories who accuse ancient ethical systems such as Aristotle's which tend to be self-centred of some kind of pernicious selfishness. Defenders of ancient theories, usually under the banner of "virtue ethics," have developed their own standard replies. Any defensible self-centered theory which places one's own excellence at the heart of one's ambition, so they maintain, does so by including at least *concern* for the good of others within one's own good, sometimes even including the flourishing of others within one's own.

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fortune. Incidentally, the etymology of the English word 'happiness,' from the Middle English 'happ' which also forms the root of 'happenstance,' is also suggestive of fortune though it has lost that association in modern usage (McMahon 2006).

[66] *NE* 1175b25-30

Aristotle presents an example of self-centeredness that is non-egoist because it is of this latter type, including the flourishing of others within the good of each individual. This is apparent from his discussion of friendship. Friendship for Aristotle is a state of character that develops out of shared ends and activities between individuals. The more significant these ends and activities are in terms of constituting human flourishing, the deeper the connection between friends. "The friendship of good people is friendship most of all..." he writes, "for what is lovable and choiceworthy seems to be what is good or pleasant without qualification, and what is lovable and choiceworthy to each person seems to be what is good or pleasant to himself; and both of these make one good person lovable and choiceworthy to another good person."[67] Recall that Aristotle holds that ultimately the ends and activities towards which a person strives are those things towards which one's character is attracted by habituation.[68] While he believes human action should be self-centered in the sense of aiming at what one believes to be one's own good, a person who displays 'noble' as opposed to 'base' self-love is drawn not to the idea of her own flourishing but the activities and states of character she believes constitutes that flourishing.[69] Friends can therefore share their perceived ultimate ends and the activities they believe constitute the human good. Insofar as they do, they aim simultaneously at each other's good as well as their own. They are drawn to the ends and activities they share, which also constitute their sense of each other and themselves. In such friendships [those in which individuals share in the activity of flourishing] the dichotomy between egoism and altruism is suspended since acting in one's own self-interest is equivalent to acting in the interests of one's friend in whose flourishing one actually takes part.

Macpherson's individualism is analogous to Aristotle's in being self-centred but not egoistic. Though offering no developed ethical theory that could be described as eudaimonistic, Macpherson is motivated by a palpable anti-utilitarianism from a position clearly influenced by Aristotle's conception of pleasure and activity. Indeed the conception of human flourishing he associates with possessive individualism is pernicious primarily because it eliminates distinctions of value between types of activity, in the sense of purposive action vs. activity lacking rational self-direction and hence creativity. "Humans [according to PI] become not purposive actors, but rather reactors to pre-given utilities and desires," writes Lindsay. The good, for Macpherson as for Aristotle, resides not in felt sensation no matter the source, nor in abiding by pre-determined principles of right, but in the activity of applying cultivated rationality and a habituated character to determining the right in given situations and the pleasures this form of action bring. Macpherson writes:

> It is almost incredible, until you come to think of it, that a society whose keyword is *enterprise*, which certainly sounds active, is in fact based on the assumption that human beings are so inert, so averse to activity, that is, to expenditure of energy, that every expenditure of energy is considered to be painful, to be, in the economist's term, a disutility. This assumption, which is a travesty of the human condition, is built right into the justifying theory of the market society, and so of the liberal society. The market society, and so the liberal society, is commonly justified on the grounds that it maximizes utilities, i.e., that it is the arrangement by which people can get the satisfactions they want with the least effort. The notion that activity itself is pleasurable, is a utility, has sunk almost without a trace under the utilitarian vision of life.[70]

However, Macpherson does not distinguish virtuous from base activity apart from the emphasis on purposive action, which significantly differentiates his account from Aristotle's. Though the claim that individualism *implies* Lukes' "ethical individualism" is discounted by Aristotle's counter-example, Macpherson might appear vulnerable to a charge—though not advanced by either Held or Lukes—that

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[67] *NE* 1156b34-57a

[68] *NE* 1113b3-14b25

[69] Annas (1988) : 12; Miller (1995) : 200; *NE* IX.9

[70] Macpherson (1965) : 38

purposive action is ethically individualist (in the sense of subjectivism). This argument fails for two reasons. Firstly, nothing in Macpherson suggests he is hostile to the Aristotelian notion that purposive action requires the development of a moral psychology through habituation of character and cultivation of practical reason that grounds Aristotle's account. Indeed such self-development seems a precondition for purposive activity. Without a character disposed to listen to reason and a rational capacity disposed to seeing which actions would be fine in particular situations, one runs the risk of internalizing prevailing opinion without adequate critical analysis. Secondly, the emphasis on purposive activity does rule out a range of activities as non-valuable. The distinction between valid and non-valid activity can be understood in several ways in Macpherson. Perhaps most simply, we can think of invalid activity as that which denies a person control over the use of her essentially human capacities, her labour.[71] PI, for example, is a conception of flourishing that allows for precisely this outcome since it considers our capacities to be owned and therefore potentially separable from what is essentially human. "Thinking of labour as a possession leaves us intact after control over labour has been stripped from us, for to quote Michael Sandel, 'if I lose something I possess, I am still the same "I" who had it.'"[72]

Macpherson has nothing like Aristotle's theory of friendship. However, his conception of flourishing as creative activity, what he calls "labour," does embody an other-regarding component. Lindsay describes this as the claim that, because the human essence is realized in labour (we are doers and creators), labour is "embedded" in the person—our capacities take on concrete forms through our labour. Since "the formulation, construction, and development of labor all take place in the milieu of social interaction", and since labour is embedded in the self, the self, Lindsay concludes, must also be socially constituted and not defined by an unalterable "inner" potential.[73] Just as Aristotle presents an example of self-centredness which includes the good of others within one's own flourishing, Macpherson's conception of labour, the activity embodied in flourishing, also presupposes a social background in which others flourish, where they too control the development and exercise of their labour. There are two reasons why this is the case.

Firstly, because his essentialism is teleological, essentially human capacities require cultivation and development, being acquired and dependent on favourable social conditions rather than genetic attributes. Indeed, when describing impediments to flourishing, Macpherson considers only "[those] which are socially variable." Physical impediments "which cannot be altered by any action of society"[74] are not considered real impediments at all. When we add to this the fact that many essential capacities Macpherson mentions correspond to activities requiring reciprocation from others who are engaging in the same activity, something like Aristotle's recognition that the human essence is manifested through other people surfaces. Actively cultivating healthy relationships with other people and doing good unto others, activities which require the creative application of one's rational capacity and emotional habituation, thus seem as necessary of Macpherson's conception of flourishing as Aristotle's.

Secondly, Macpherson assumes that essentially human capacities are properly developed and exercised only if they do not impede the development and exercise of similar capacities in others.[75] Thus only those capacities which foster the equal development of others are, on Macpherson's view, worthy of being developed at all. This is a striking position in that it rules out any activity requiring the subjugation of any others from being valued at all. To the extent that market, slave, or feudal economies require some individuals to do work which prevents and/or degrades the development of their

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[71] Labour is a concept with a technical meaning in Macpherson meant to capture the sense in which human beings are capable of creatively developing their essential capacities.
[72] Lindsay (1996): 72 (quoting Sandel [1989]: 55)
[73] Ibid., 27
[74] Macpherson (1973): 59
[75] Ibid., 73

essentially human capacities[76] but in doing enable others to enjoy more leisurely lives which afford what would otherwise be considered capacities which are essentially human, these systems are not enabling the development of any such capacities. This certainly reveals an intense concern for the interests of others embedded within his conception of the good though it also seems to stray quite far from Aristotle's view. Indeed, an Aristotelian might object that though it is unfortunate that under certain historical conditions such subjugation might be necessary to develop essentially human capacities, this does not mean that the capacities which are being developed are any less valuable. On the other hand, Macpherson's position here can be seen as Aristotelian in that it corroborates Aristotle's view that cultivating one's own excellence requires that others with whom one interacts exhibit at least some degree of excellence themselves since one participates in the good of others with whom one shares virtuous activity. These considerations, however, do not bear on the present discussion.

§4.5 *Holist vs. Individualist Interpretations of the common good*

We have seen that Aristotle's conception of human flourishing is individualist in respect of its essentialism and self-centred perfectionism yet neither does the former result in an 'onion theory' of the self nor the latter in egoism, two characteristics Held and Lukes are committed to concluding from a theory displaying these attributes. This goes some way in undermining their central claim that an individualist conception of flourishing necessarily prevents an appreciation of the social thesis. However, using Aristotle as a counterexample requires confronting an additional controversy. Those who argue that Aristotle's conception of flourishing is holist maintain that his sensitivity to the social embedded-ness of human beings is a product of that holism. Insofar as his open-ended essentialism and other-regarding perfectionism contribute to that sensitivity, they do so because they are informed by that holist perspective. This position is far too complex to refute here. Instead I will only attempt to establish the plausibility of interpreting his conception of the good in individualist terms.

There are several reasons why Aristotle is sometimes thought to have a holist conception of the good. All have to do with his meaning of the common good or the flourishing of the political community. Aristotle's criterion that the ideal polis be ruled for the common advantage rather than for the private good of its rulers[77] and the claim that the good of the city is prior to that of the individual[78] are usually taken to mean either that the good of individuals is entirely derivative of the separate good of the polis or that the good of the polis includes the separate goods of individuals but is also superior and that these individual goods are identical. Miller attributes the former interpretation to Popper (1962) and Barnes (1990) who, he claims, see Aristotle as an "extreme holist" like Plato.[79] Here the claim is that individual welfare is defined in terms of a separate, community welfare where individuals exist for the sake of the whole. Since the good of the individual consists in the good of the community, the individual's good will only be differentiated from that of others to the extent that performing a different function contributes to the common end. That end is shared by all in the sense that it determines the ends of individuals. Miller stresses that Barnes' interpretation of what he calls "Aristotle's axiom"[80] that supposedly underlines his holist conception of the human good is controversial to say the least. The component "if, and only if it is good for *Y* that *X* is *F*" delivers the extreme holist conclusion only if taken

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[76] Through, for example, coercing unfortunates into working long hours at highly stressful occupations leaving little energy for developing aesthetic tastes, satisfying curiosities, experimentation, communing with nature, cultivating relationships, etc.

[77] *Pol.* 1279a28-31

[78] *Pol.* 1253a19

[79] Miller (1995): 196-97

[80] "If *X* is essentially (or naturally) a part of some natural whole *Y*, then it is good for *X* that *X* is *F* if, and only if, it is good for *Y* that *X* is *F*" Miller (1995): 196.

to imply the stronger premise that "individual interests are determined by and depend upon the interests of the whole."[81] In fact, Miller points out, "Aristotle's axiom" can equally convey an individualist reading where it is good for the whole that the part flourishes where that flourishing is derived from the part rather than the whole.

Holist readings of Aristotle's conception of human flourishing are more typically "moderate" where the end of individuals is inherent to those individuals and not simply a means to the end of the political community. These interpretations remain holist in the sense that (a) they read the common good or good of the political community as retaining a distinctiveness apart from the good of individuals and (b) they insist that the good of individuals consists in common, more or less identical, activity, what Yack calls "communion." Communion has the additional characteristic of shared activity which involves an intense identification not just with what one holds in common with others but with a separate collective identity or common actor. [82] MacIntyre exemplifies this perspective, arguing that Aristotle sees the political community as one in which human beings together pursue a single human good rather than the presumed alternative of "providing the arena in which each individual seeks his or her own private good."[83] He takes the Aristotelian combination of the good of the polis and that of the individual to mean a single activity in which we ideally engage collectively. "There is no way of my pursuing my good which is necessarily antagonistic to you pursuing yours," he writes, "because the good is neither mine peculiarly nor yours peculiarly."[84]

From this perspective, MacIntyre interprets Aristotle's essentialism in a much less open-ended fashion than I have here (§4.3). While the human essence remains sensitive to social context, it does so as a result of being defined as a communion-like activity. Here the claim that human beings can only flourish within a political community[85] is taken to presuppose "a wide range of agreement in that community on goods and virtues" and this agreement is taken to imply social harmony and a lack of civil conflict.[86] Thus the activity which defines human excellence is much more spelled out and predetermined. Though recognizing the central role of *phronēsis* and personal judgement, his emphasis on excellent activity being coordinated and harmonious suggests he sees the community sharing in the exercise of *phronēsis* as one sharing its particular uses or outcomes. For MacIntyre, Aristotle appreciates the thesis that human flourishing is a social activity requiring particular forms of community to be realized by employing as a highly determined essentialism, one that demands we harmonize our particular uses of *phronēsis* to act nobly in a similar manner and identify with a common good apart from the good of our shared action.

Similarly, MacIntyre's moderate-holistic interpretation shapes his understanding of Aristotle's theory of friendship. The ends and activities friends share are construed as the collective identity to which they adhere. The good attained by fellow citizens in civic friendship is considered part of one's own good not because our common activity is the *aiming* at a good which happens to be the same—though might be divergently articulated by our individual circumstances and proclivities—but because we share the same aim *and* the activities of its particular manifestations. No room is made for a general, shared activity with individually particular manifestations. This is why MacIntyre bemoans the irreconcilable moral pluralism of modern society as a grave tragedy. Only under ancient or medieval conditions where there supposedly existed overwhelming moral consensus could his version of Aristotelian perfectionism actually hold.

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[81] Ibid., 197

[82] Yack (1993): 31

[83] MacInytre 1981, 160

[84] Ibid., 213

[85] The famous "man is a political animal" (*Pol*. 1253a2-3)

[86] Ibid., 141, 47

However even this moderate-holistic interpretation is widely disputed by Aristotelians. What Miller calls "moderate individualism" is often offered as an alternative account of the relationship between the flourishing of individuals and that of the political community. Bernard Yack describes this position as an interpretation of Aristotle's "political teleology" which maintains that the political community exists "by nature" (i.e. has a natural function) only to the extent that it is composed of human beings who exist by nature.[87] In other words, the political community has no end or 'good' apart from that of its member citizens considered as individual human beings. This is because the political community *is* its component individuals whose flourishing it serves. The polis flourishes only when its citizens flourish not because their flourishing is derivative upon its own or part of it as a hand to a body, but because the good of the political community is precisely those organizations of political offices and social institutions that promote the flourishing of individuals.

Yack offers the following argument to support the moderate individualist position. Firstly, A holist interpretation that has the claim that the polis exists by nature imply that it has its own internal, natural function presents a contradiction for Aristotle's account of natural substances and political regimes. A natural substance realizes its essence or function "always or for the most part."[88] Yet Aristotle also insists that no existing political community closely resembles the good society of *Pol.* VII/VIII. "In all other natural species that Aristotle examines the individual members that fail to realize their complete natural form are the exceptions. If the polis almost always fails to complete its development, it seems impossible to justify Aristotle's description of it as natural."[89] Secondly, human flourishing, though only possible within certain forms of political community, does not require the ideal political community. Here Yack extends the role of phronesis as a universal virtue requiring individual application to enable human excellence across varied contexts to the specification of particular social norms, laws, and the distribution of powers as we saw in §4.3. The moderate individualist interpretation of the common good therefore gets around the contradiction posed by holist interpretations by seeing only the individual citizens as natural whose flourishing becomes possible even in imperfect regimes. As long as the political community embodies conditions under which the development of virtuous character is possible, even if not ideal, it will be contributing to what is natural about it—its individual citizens.

Holists will object to this argument claiming that social harmony and the compossible realization of human ends is no longer possible if those ends are allowed to differ radically in terms of actual activity. After all, this is why Aristotle saw the necessity of the institution of ostracism which enabled the political community to maintain the agreement on matters of the good upon which the flourishing of its members depends.[90] However, as any reasonable individualist would admit, in order to best approximate a congruence between the flourishing of individuals, a part must sometimes be sacrificed. "In this respect," explains C.D.C. Reeve, "Aristotle thinks we are like hands. One will find this insufficiently reassuring only if one thinks...that congruence must be guaranteed in all circumstances. Aristotle certainly fails to provide such reassurance, but this is almost certainly a strength rather than a weakness of his view." [91] Yet such a sacrifice need not be made in the name of maintaining more or less homogenous views concerning the good. If *the* human good embodies a great range of particular activities issuing from general habits and character traits, such sacrifices will be made in order to maintain the order that, given local circumstances, best provides for the development of these habits and traits. Where the holist sees congruence between the flourishing of individuals in conformity, the

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[87] Yack (1993): 89-90
[88] *Phys*. 197a32
[89] Yack (1993): 89
[90] *Pol.* 1280a30-34
[91] Reeve (1998): lxxii

individualist seeks a more modest congruence that can accommodate competing interests and articulations of noble character.

§5. Conclusion

This essay has argued that C.B. Macpherson's conception of human nature does not prevent his overall normative theory from fulfilling its ambition to be 'practical' in the sense of advocating the internalization of an ethical standpoint helpful in identifying what I have called 'internal impediments'. I began by distinguishing this theoretical ambition as it figures in Aristotle's political philosophy as a concern with improving human activity rather than merely identifying the nature of good or noble actions in various spheres of human life (§2). I then argued that Macpherson's normative project shares this ambition (§3). My main argument sought to refute the criticisms of Virginia Held and Steven Lukes, both of whom maintain that Macpherson cannot fulfill this 'practical' ambition because his conception of human nature is individualistic. This objection was further specified as the view that a sufficient grasp of internal impediments depends upon an ethical standpoint privileging a holist conception of human beings since only a holist conception can grasp the extent to which human beings are socially constituted (§4.1). My counterargument depended on refuting two further assumptions upon which this conclusion relies. These were, firstly, that an individualistic conception of human beings implies what Lukes' calls the "the onion theory of the self" and, secondly, that it implies egoism. Because Held and Lukes' arguments hold that all accounts of the good which feature these characteristics necessarily fail to grasp the extent of our social embedded-ness, I was able to refute their central claim using a counter-example. This was most effectively accomplished with the moderately individualist interpretation of Aristotle's theory of human flourishing, upon which Macpherson's own account is closely modeled (§4.2-5) and whose practical ambition it shares (§3).

If this argument is valid, it has implications for the interpretation of Macpherson's legacy and the viability of Aristotelian *politikē* in normative political theory. Macpherson's political theory should be appreciated not only for its contribution to the history of political thought, but also for its particular Aristotelian model of practical reason unusual amongst Aristotle's contemporary followers. Whereas neo-Aristotelians such as MacIntyre and Nussbaum tend to emphasize either a holist conception of human flourishing or the incorporation of his ethical system into the sort of action-guiding theory Annas associates with modern moral philosophy (§2, 4.3), the practical aspirations of *politikē* to employ theory in the improvement of one's activity has not received much attention. That Macpherson offers a variation of this sort of theory and one which is defensible against two important charges against its viability should, I hope, encourage a closer consideration both of Macpherson's theoretical contributions and of alternative approaches to normative theory which an engagement with ancient political thought can open up to us.

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