Karen Margrethe Nielsen is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Philosophy and a Tutorial Fellow of Somerville College, Oxford. She received her PhD in 2006 at Cornell University with a dissertation on Aristotle’s theory of decision, supervised by Terry Irvin. Since then, she has published extensively on Aristotle, focusing especially on his ethical works. The topics of her research range from the role of principles in Aristotle’s ethics, to the reception history of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In 2015, Karen Margrethe co-edited (together with Devin Henry) a volume entitled *Bridging the Gap between Aristotle’s Science and Ethics*, a collection of papers that explore to what extent Aristotle deploys scientific concepts and methods in his ethical works. I met Karen Margrethe at Somerville College Oxford to have a conversation on Aristotle’s ethics, touching upon topics such as Aristotle’s relevance today, the relation between practical wisdom and other forms of knowledge and his conception of vice.

Looking through a list of your publications, one can easily tell that you have a passion for Aristotle. How, and why, did this passion emerge?

Well, I suppose it’s a passion that goes back to my days as an undergraduate at the University of Trondheim. There was one elective part of the *Examen philosophicum*, where I chose to do “poetikk og retorikk” [poetics and rhetoric], with a wonderful teacher called Inger Louise Forselv where we read Aristotle’s *Poetics* in full. That was really my first exposure to Aristotle’s works. And I recall just being immediately drawn in, both by the topic, and by Aristotle’s way of writing. The department at Trondheim was, at that time, very inclined towards Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. So I think I had an interest in ethics from early on. And as part of my master’s thesis I also did this unit on Aristotle’s ethics, taught by Truls Wyller. And then I read a lot of Martha Nussbaum! So, like a lot of people, I came to appreciate the richness of ancient philosophy through her. Even though, in retrospect, I tend to disagree with her on a number of interpretive issues. But there’s no denying that she has this enormously captivating way of approaching moral questions – questions in moral psychology and so on – in Aristotle and of course also in the Stoics.

At what point in this process did you start learning ancient Greek?

Right! So this was actually after I started my master’s in Trondheim. Like a lot of people, reading philosophers like Heidegger and also Coplestone’s *A History of Philosophy*, I always felt that those little bits of untranslated Greek held the key to the whole argument. So unless you could actually decipher that phrase, you’re completely at sea. And so I signed up for this introductory Greek course, and at the time they only taught New Testament Greek. But I thought it was worth spending a term just reading the Bible, if it meant I could read
Illustrasjon av Jenny Hjertaas Ljones
Aristotle afterwards. I think we spent an entire term just going through the first couple of pages of the Gospel according to John. And then later they added an additional 10 point unit where I actually got to study classical Greek.

In your research, you focus a lot on Aristotle’s ethical works. With the emergence of contemporary virtue ethics in the middle of the last century, philosophers brought Aristotle back into the field we now call normative ethics. To what extent do you believe Aristotle’s ethical works are relevant, both to our lives and to philosophical discussions today?

From my experience just teaching the *Nicomachean Ethics* to students, there’s a sense of immediate recognition of the questions that he is posing. You know, when he talks about voluntary action, when he talks about pleasure – even when he talks about friendship, which is a topic that obviously reflects the social relations of a bygone era – you don’t have this sense that you’re looking at questions, or even responses, that are obsolete. In fact, he seems to very much understand something about human nature and human experience. When he talks about pleasure, for instance, he distinguishes between pleasures that are proper to an activity, and that tend to sustain it, and alien pleasures, which destroy it. And he gives this famous example. For instance, he says that people especially enjoy eating nuts in the theatre when the actors are bad. And those types of illustrations are quintessentially Aristotelian. I’m not a Kant scholar, but I suspect you won’t find those kernels of insight reading Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and so on.

Now when it comes to the uses and abuses of Aristotle in contemporary virtue ethics, I suppose I’m very much open to creative appropriations of past thinkers – conscripting them into service for modern projects. So, in that regard, even if in some cases those projects have certain anachronistic features, as long as one is aware of what one is doing – that we are actually taking an Aristotelian idea and developing it, we are not claiming to be expounding Aristotle’s own words, and we are not claiming to be capturing exactly what Aristotle was on about – then I think that can be a very fruitful approach. And indeed, one of the benefits of doing the history of philosophy, is that you are forced to encounter ideas that in many cases seem quite alien and challenge your assumptions, and very often challenge them successfully. On the other hand, I do find there’s a kind of conflation between doing the history of philosophy and articulating ideas inspired by ancient philosophers. So, if one manages to do both of those, but being aware of what’s what, that’s definitely a fruitful approach.

Would you say that that’s your approach when you do history of philosophy on Aristotle’s ethics?

Yeah, so I don’t really consider myself a virtue ethicist per se, but I guess I’m an Aristotelian ethicist. You know, there’s all this literature asking, “Was Hume a Humean?” or “Did Plato come up with the idea of knowledge as justified true belief?” and so forth. And very often you find that the ancient approaches are subtly different, or asking different questions from the ones that interest contemporary philosophers. And in the case of Aristotle scholarship, people like Philippa Foot obviously have made really valuable contributions both to virtue ethics and Aristotle scholarship. So it’s possible to do both, and to do both responsibly. But the worry is of course that people come to Aristotle’s texts with preconceived notions of what Aristotle is trying to tell them. And they become resistant to textual evidence to the contrary.

In 2015, you co-edited a volume entitled Bridging the Gap between Aristotle’s Science and Ethics, *a collection of papers on the methodology of Aristotle’s ethics. The aim of this book is to demonstrate that scholars often overemphasize the gap between ethics and science. Could you tell us something about Aristotle’s method in the Nicomachean Ethics?*

This is a rather large topic that people have written a lot about. But, one of the famous aspects of Aristotle’s methodology is of course his insistence that ethics is an imprecise science. And he’s warning, at least in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, not to expect the same degree of precision from someone doing ethics as you would from someone doing, say, mathematics. So he’s insisting that the degree of precision needs to be commensurate to the subject matter. And there’s a famous passage where he observes that the phenomena with which ethics is concerned are variable. But he warns us that we
shouldn’t take this variability to suggest that it’s all matter of convention. So he wants to maintain a realist notion of ethical truths. But nevertheless, he wants to argue that circumstantial factors determine what the virtuous course of action is. So while you can give an objective account of virtue, ethics will never be able to make general prescriptions that hold always and without exception. Instead, ethics will be able to present generalizations which hold for the most part. And, in this regard, it seem that ethical thought differs from scientific thought, which at least on the model that Aristotle outlines in the *Analytics* and in Book VI in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, proceeds by demonstration from universals, trying to articulate scientific explanations that hold necessarily and without exception. So that seems to set up a stark dichotomy between scientific reasoning on the one hand, and ethical reasoning on the other, where ethical reasoning will always involve attention to particulars and so forth. Aristotle of course famously is the first person to give a systematic account of the difference between practical and theoretical wisdom. And I think for that reason people have sometimes overemphasized the points of divergence between the two. And they haven’t seen that Aristotle is also emphasizing that there are structural similarities. One problem here is that Aristotle’s model of demonstration doesn’t seem to fit biological sciences. If you look at Aristotle’s biological works it concerns kinds – living beings – and in the sublunary sphere, things don’t hold of necessity and always and so on. Instead you are dealing with these “for the most part” relations. So if Aristotle allows that biological science is a science, then it seems it has a lot in common with political science.

You mentioned Aristotle’s distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. There’s also an interesting link between productive and practical knowledge in Aristotle’s ethics. And you talk about this in your own paper in the volume, that medicine has a lot in common with ethics. Can you say something about this?

Right! So, one of the points I am trying to make in that article is that, although Aristotle is famous for emphasizing practical perception, – the importance of perceptual particulars for practical wisdom – nevertheless, despite what has sometimes been claimed, he doesn’t argue that we can simply dispense with generalizations on ethical reasoning and deliberation. So whoever reads through the ethics will be struck by the number of times that Aristotle invokes medical reasoning and medical examples in order to support his ethical points. And I think this is one way in which this medical analogy helps him explain why generalizations have a role to play in ethics, despite this circumstantial relativism that he seems to be defending, a realist circumstantial relativism. When he talks about what’s healthy, for instance, he allows that what’s healthy for an animal depends on what species it belongs to, it’s relative to the nature of the animal. He also allows that what’s healthy can vary, depending on the condition of the person you are treating. So it may be that a kind of diet that would be appropriate for a healthy person is not appropriate for someone who are not healthy. Think about eating salt. This isn’t his example, but it illustrates the point. In general, eating salt is bad for your health. But if you think of someone who is severely dehydrated, getting enough salt is critical for restoring their health. And so I think Aristotle wants to, on the other hand, maintain that the generalization that salt is unhealthy for us as the kinds of living being that we are, while also allowing that in some cases salt is a source of health. So when we reason about moral decision-making in the same way, I take Aristotle to hold that things like wealth, honor and friends are all good things for human beings. But we can hold that without maintaining that health is always in your interest. The Stoics give this example where it’s not good to be healthy, when the emperor is conscripting for his army – he needs soldiers for whatever unjust cause he has undertaken. And in that case health is actually bad for you. So the way that I read Aristotle, he thinks of claims about what is good or bad as true generalizations that admit of exceptions. When he articulates claims about what is good for us in general, he is talking about what is good for us as the kinds of beings we are. And indeed, he seems to be pursuing the same line of thought when he talks about pleasure. What is unqualifiedly pleasant is what’s pleasant for the good person. Similarly, you could
say that what’s unqualifiedly good is what’s good for the person who is good.

One of the main targets of this paper is the particularist reading of Aristotle. What is this, and why do you think it fails?

You can see how people would take Aristotle to be a kind of antidote to an approach to ethics that treats ethical deliberation as a matter of applying general principles to cases. So as long as you can articulate the rule, then all you have to do is just apply it. And so you don’t need any practical discernment, you don’t need this kind of sensitivity to circumstantial factors that Aristotle emphasizes. In a way I think that particularists are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. They want to say, look, this approach to ethics where ethics is all about finding the right principles and then just applying them mechanically, that’s not working. So you go to the opposite extreme and say that we have no use for moral principle whatsoever in our ethical deliberations. It’s all about circumstances. Everything varies in this extreme way. If you read Jonathan Dancy, he’s very keen on arguments for showing how certain properties shift their valence depending on their context. And there were thinkers in antiquity that held views very similar to that. So if you think about the unorthodox stoic Aristo of Chios, who maintained that, on account of this type of variability, you could always think of a situation in which what normally would be good, in fact isn’t. We shouldn’t even allow that there are any true generalizations. He argues against orthodox Stoics that there is no such thing as a category of things that are preferred. Nor a category of things that are dispreferred. There aren’t any kinds like that. Instead, it’s all dependent on the circumstances. What Aristotle emphasizes when he talks about phronesis (practical wisdom) is that knowledge of universals is not enough – in addition to knowledge of universals, you need perception of particulars. And I think what he means is what is generally true. We speak of universals, and that suggests that you have some exceptionless rule. But I think what he really has in mind is that what we call ‘universals’ is what’s generally true. He does seem to say that practical wisdom requires both that you grasp these general principles, and indeed that you have an account of the nature of human happiness. But it also required that you are capable of deciding in your particular circumstances how to best realize that ideal. So for that reason I think Aristotle’s particularist readers are a bit selective in the way that they consider the evidence in the ethics. And they don’t realize that his notion of practical wisdom isn’t simply a notion of practical perception that sort of intuits what the right course of action is, without having any kind of scaffolding in the form of an ethical theory and in the form of these action guiding general principles.

Do you think that this sort of framework of doing ethics can be used in applied ethics?

That’s interesting! You very often have people saying that there are three normative theories – deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics – and teaching people practical ethics is all about telling them how these are used to solve practical problems. And I think Aristotle is a bit modest on behalf of ethical theory, in so far as he doesn’t think that acquiring knowledge of theoretical ethics is what’s going to make you good at making ethical decisions. So if you already have the right kind of training, the right kind of upbringing, then adding this theoretical superstructure will perhaps make you better at hitting the mean in your actions and your feelings and so on. But it’s not as if you can put someone in a classroom and teach them virtue ethics and then make them good people, or good decision makers, simply by equipping them with this theoretical tool. So here I think Aristotle is more realistic than many contemporary ethicists. Compare that to the kind of approach you see on consequentialist, where really you just need to get your understanding of the general good and how to promote it right, and the right unit of measurement. And then you need a spreadsheet. And then you can work it all out! And make the right decisions. That is making far more ambitious claims on behalf of ethical theory.

Aristotle stresses the importance of habituating character over time in order to be able to successfully navigate the world ethically.

Yeah! And if you think about medical ethics, or any other aspect of applied ethics, it seems that
actually having had experience with the types of ethical dilemmas that you meet in an emergency room and so on is really crucial for appreciating the complexity of the situation and which factors are important. You wouldn’t really want to have some group of philosophers walking in, with no experience of the day to day life of an emergency doctor, and then somehow telling them that their consequentialist spreadsheet has made some calculations, telling them what the right course of action and what the right policy is. But that’s not to say that someone trained in normative theory couldn’t offer additional perspective, or help conceptualize and sort out some of the thoughts that people with actual experience might have had all along. But it just means that one need to be a bit more modest about what can be achieved simply by theorizing. And in this respect too, it seems that Aristotle is very much with the times. If you think about the emphasis people tend to place on lived experience these days. Where, you know, you need the stakeholders’ views and so on. He’s certainly someone that would allow that this lived experience does make people better judges.

Myles Burnyeat argues that habituation according to Aristotle has this cognitive aspect, so that through habituation, you are allowed to grasp what is valuable in life. So in that sense, you get some theoretical knowledge from your experience with ethical situations.

Yeah, and I think he is correct, and there’s furthermore a widespread misunderstanding of the reach of habituation in Aristotle’s theory. There’s a common line of interpretation according to which it’s just the non-rational parts of the soul – your emotions and desires and so on – that get trained through repetition. So that there’s this kind of rote learning that disposes you toward the right actions and the right feelings. And he gives all these analogies to learning how to play an instrument, you know, learning a craft. But obviously if you think about the way people actually learn to play an instrument – and by the way, I don’t play anything beyond the recorder – there’s a teacher standing by. The teacher gives instructions, saying, for example, if you hold your arm more like that you’ll be able to make this sound more easily. Or, if you are learning a craft, they will also offer constant feedback on

the way you use your tools and so on, explaining why it is that you need to adjust your approach a little bit. So it seems as if habituating the non-rational part of the soul goes hand in hand with habituation of the rational part of the soul. And indeed when Aristotle first introduces this notion of habituation, he says that if we didn’t need practice, then no teachers would be needed. So already at that point, he’s giving us reasons to reject this sort of mindless model of habituation. So I’m leaning towards the view that not simply the virtues of character but also prudence (practical wisdom) arises through habituation.

Julia Annas, among others, stresses that vice is an understudied part of Aristotle. I saw that you published a paper on vice in the Nicomachean Ethics in 2017. What is the aim of this paper?

A lot has been written on Aristotle’s account of virtue, but at some point it just struck me that his conception of vice seems harder to articulate. We are all familiar with his definition of virtue as a state lying in the mean, flanked by a state of excess and deficiency and so on. So, in that regard, it’s not difficult to see what he means by virtue. But he can’t hold, given this doctrine of the mean, that vice is simply the opposite of virtue in any straightforward sense. And indeed it seems that the types of flaws exemplified by different vices are pretty different. So, you know, the difference between being intemperate and being insensitive for instance, on the one hand, or being a buffoon and being devoid of any humor whatsoever (with wit being the virtue in the middle). So I wanted to try to find out exactly how he would define vice. What has been written on this topic seems to be focused pretty narrowly on a seeming contradiction between his general account of vice and his description of vice towards the end of the ethics, where he talks about similarities between the vicious person and the akratic agent. In Book IX, 4 he argues that the vicious person suffers from regrets and so on, and is his own enemy. At the same time, one requirement of being properly vicious is that you believe that you ought to act in the way you do. It’s not simply that you’re easily led astray by your emotions, or that you tend to forget about fairness and so on, because you get carried away. But it’s rather that
you have rationally endorsed the type of behavior that you are pursuing. So, you know, you think that it’s right that people should try to overreach and get more and more for themselves. Think about Thrasymachus in the Republic Book I. He’s often portrayed as an amoralist, but you can imagine someone just saying that, “This is how we ought to behave.” It’s not just that you are being foolish by not grasping; it’s that it’s admirable and good to get more than your fair share. So there it seems as if we wouldn’t expect there to be any kind of internal strife or conflict in the soul of the vicious agent. This is someone who is psychologically unified. And so one question is, how come, given that the vicious agent rationally endorses his vicious behavior, that he’s nevertheless later said to experience all kinds of regrets and having been pained by his actions, and experiences night terrors when he thinks about what he’s done.

Yeah, so that seems to imply that the vicious agent is acratic. Cause then it makes sense that he regrets what he's done. His rationality and his appetites are not in harmony.

If you think about your vicious agent of choice, you could think about crazed Roman emperors – Caligula, Nero – you could think about contemporary politicians, take your pick. And in one sense we would all like to think that everyone has a conscience. That everyone has this dark moment of the soul where they realize that what they are up to is no good, and they feel torn about it, thinking, “This is not how I ought to live.” But on the other hand you might think that’s just a convenient fiction. That in fact we can imagine someone who’s entirely without regrets, may regret not having been able to control the consequences of their vice. But that’s more of a managerial issue, it’s not moral regret, or any moral hangover that they are experiencing. But nevertheless, Aristotle does seem to think that the vicious agent is acting contrary to wish, so contrary to rational wish, despite acting in accordance with his decision. And that’s one of the tensions in his theory that I wanted to explore. To see how far is his account of the vicious agent confined to this Platonic assumption (Plato’s analysis of the tyrant), who is his own worst enemy. And to what extent can we make sense of these claims about regret without positing this rather anachro-

nistic idea of the inner force of conscience.

Earlier we talked about that ethical expertise is similar to skill knowledge. Could one say that vice, in some instances, is a skill in the same sense as virtue?

That question touches on the extent to which vice could be conceived of as a purely non-rational state, and I think in one sense Aristotle can’t hold that, precisely because he thinks that the vicious person suffers from what he calls “ignorance in the decision”, in so far as he has the wrong conception of the good that he should be aiming at. But there’s a further question of whether vice also needs at least instrument reason in order to pursue its aims. Think of someone who has the wrong ideals, who is just very clumsy in putting them into practice. So a kind of vicious klutz. That person wouldn’t be quite as off-putting and not quite as fear-inducing as someone who not simply had the wrong conception of the good, but also had the power to promote it. Recall the definition of virtue that Meno gives in the Meno, the idea that virtue is desiring good things and having the power to acquire them. And so you might think that vice is desiring things that are in fact bad, and having the cleverness needed to pursue your aim.

Aristotle distinguishes between cleverness and practical wisdom. With cleverness comes the ability to achieve your ends, but those ends can be bad. Whereas if you are practically wise, your ends are good.

There’s some ambiguity in the way he describes cleverness. But I guess on one line of interpretation, cleverness is a kind of morally neutral ability to match means and ends, and to put your decisions into practice. And it seems as if Aristotle would allow that you can have someone who is clever at promoting things that aren’t good. So Anscombe talks about the clever acratic, someone who despite his commitment to fidelity, nevertheless plots to seduce the neighbor’s wife. So it’s not that this person is out of control because his emotions overwhelm him, but it’s rather that he has this appetitive desire and he then calculates on the basis of that desire how to seduce this neighbor. All the while, thinking that this kind of behavior is bad. And so I don’t think that there’s any reason to hold that
he would deny that the vicious person can be clever, indeed, that’s why they are so terrifying. And the fact that they have no scruples means that the range of possible courses of action is much wider for the vicious person than for the virtuous person. Because, as Aristotle says, there’s usually just one way of getting it right, and many ways of getting it wrong. But whether you would say that cleverness is a requirement for vice, I’m not sure. It’s interesting that Aristotle’s discussion of vice is mainly a long shadow cast by his analysis of virtue. So you just sort of see this shadow image of vice on the wall, so to speak, in the Nicomachean Ethics. And then you have to try to fill in the picture.

You can only get it right in one way, but you can get it wrong in many different ways. So I guess the vicious person can both have cleverness, and lack cleverness, as there are countless ways of being vicious. The virtues are also unified through practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, so that you cannot be brave without being just and so forth. But it seems quite difficult to unify vices in the same way. All of these factors make vice more difficult to study, perhaps?

It becomes a far more variegated phenomenon, there seems to be far more variation among vicious people. This question that you raise, about whether there is a unity of vice in the same way that you have a unity of virtue is quite interesting. I think for Aristotle, in fact, there’s neither unity nor reciprocity among the vices. So I think it’s possible to have some vices and not some others. Even though it’s not possible to have one virtue without the others, I think you can have one vice without having the others. It would be very strange, indeed impossible for someone to have all the vices, given that for each virtue there’s two opposite vices. You can’t be both insensitive and intemperate at the same time. So, could he argue that if you have one vice of deficiency then you have all of them? Well, it just doesn’t seem promising to argue that someone who is insensitive will also be boorish and so on. I think for the Stoics it’s quite different. Because they have this intellectual conception of vice. But, maybe not. I’m supposed to be writing this short online book on vice in ancient philosophy, looking at Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. But I still have to sit down and think hard about the Stoic conception of vice.

As a last question, I wanted to ask you; why should we study Aristotle today?

Right! I think we should study Aristotle for two reasons. One, because his ethical world is so different from ours, in many regards. And two, because it’s so similar. So there is both this sense of entering a completely foreign landscape but also a sense that this landscape is very much our own in many regards. So it’s a bit like making friends with people from various places around the world with different life experiences. And you think that their outlook on life is so very much removed from your own, and yet, you still see all these affinities.

NOTES