

Aristotle on practical wisdom¹

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the question ‘What is the good for human beings?’ What is it that we are aiming at, that would provide a successful, fulfilling, good life? We undertake actions and activities either for the sake of something further or ‘for their own sake’. Suppose there is some end for whose sake we do everything else. Then this end would be the good for us. As Julia Annas notes in her article ‘Virtue ethics’, in thinking about why we do what we do, we end up thinking about how to live one’s life well as a whole.

Eudaimonia is the good for a human life. It is often translated as ‘happiness’ but Aristotle says it is ‘living well and faring well’. Eudaimonia is ‘the good’ or the ‘good life’ for human beings as the particular sort of being we are. To achieve it is to live as best a human being can live. But what sort of life is a good or flourishing life for us? Aristotle argues that a human life is distinctively the life of a being that can be guided by reason. Qualities that enable us to lead such a life are virtues. In this handout, we consider Aristotle’s theory of the intellectual virtue, practical wisdom. (For further discussion of his concept of eudaimonia, see the handout ‘Aristotle on eudaimonia, function and virtue’, and for more on other virtues, see ‘Aristotle on virtue’.)

PRACTICAL WISDOM

Practical wisdom (phronesis) is an intellectual virtue, a virtue of practical reasoning. Aristotle draws a distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason. Roughly, theoretical reason investigates what we can’t change and aims at the truth. Practical reason investigates what we can change and aims at making good choices. Reasoning about what we can change is deliberation, so practical reason is expressed in deliberation. To make good choices, not only must our reasoning be correct, but we must also have the right desires.

The person with practical wisdom deliberates well about how to live a good life. So practical wisdom is ‘a true and reasoned state or capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man’.

The role of practical wisdom

Practical wisdom differs from other sorts of knowledge both because of its complexity and its practical nature. Aristotle claims that it involves

1. a general conception of what is good or bad, related to the conditions for human flourishing;

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 288-92

2. the ability to perceive, in light of that general conception, what is required in terms of feeling, choice and action in a particular situation;
3. the ability to deliberate well; and
4. the ability to act on that deliberation.

So it involves general knowledge, particular knowledge, an ability to reason towards a choice, and an ability to act on that choice.

There are different ways in which we can fail to deliberate well.

- a. We can deliberate with the wrong end. Our starting point is wrong, and so our choice is wrong. Our general knowledge of the good is faulty.
- b. We can have the right end, and perhaps even achieve it. However, we don't understand the right means to the end, and so if we achieve our end, this is accidental or lucky. Either our knowledge of the particular circumstances or our reasoning is faulty.
- c. We can fail to deliberate when we should or take too long.

So practical wisdom means deliberating with a good end, identifying the right means, and doing so in a timely way. In its fullest sense, practical wisdom involves deliberating from the most unqualified end, eudaimonia itself.

Practical wisdom and rules

Point (2) above says that practical wisdom involves understanding what is required in a particular situation in light of a general understanding of what is good. The question that faces us on any occasion is how to achieve what is good - what the good life involves - in the here and now, in this situation. But there are no rules for applying knowledge of the good life to the current situation. What is right on a particular occasion is in accordance with 'right reason', but Aristotle has argued that this can vary from one occasion to another. Furthermore, this kind of insight is inseparable from making a good decision: we must not only understand the situation (which can involve considerable sensitivity), but also understand how to act well in it.

This makes it impossible to make generalisations about right and wrong, good and bad, that are true in all cases. Practical wisdom intuitively 'grasps' the particular facts involved in the case. This does not make ethics subjective, as there is a truth of the matter to be discovered. However, proving the truth of one view against another is not possible by argument alone. If you are blind, I may not be able to convince you of the colour of moonlight; if you lack insight into what is good, I may not be able to convince you of the goodness of being kind. If you can't understand the situation we are facing, I may not be able to convince you that the right thing to do on this occasion is to be generous.

And so, Aristotle argues, practical wisdom is not something that can be taught, for what can be taught is general, not particular. Rules and principles will rarely apply in any clear way to real situations. Instead, moral knowledge is only acquired through experience.

THE RELATION BETWEEN PRACTICAL WISDOM, VIRTUE AND ACTION

How does practical wisdom relate to virtue and virtuous action? We can imagine this objection: living a good life is a matter of being good, and this involves the virtues. So what use is practical wisdom?

A first, simple answer is this: the virtues (justice, courage, generosity, etc.) set our ends. Because we are virtuous, we aim at the good life, and we have a reliable conception of what this is (it involves justice, courage, generosity, etc.). But that isn't enough to live a good life, because it doesn't tell us what is good (courageous, etc.) in this particular situation. For that, we need practical wisdom to identify the (constitutive) means to our virtuous ends.

Further reflection tells us more. We can draw a distinction between acting in accordance with a virtue - roughly 'doing the right thing' - and doing a fully virtuous action. A fully virtuous action is one in which the agent knows what they are doing and chooses the act for its own sake. Both this knowledge and this kind of choice depend on having practical wisdom. The knowledge involves understanding what is good in this situation, and choice depends upon deliberation, and good deliberation involves practical wisdom. So acting virtuously requires practical wisdom.

So Aristotle draws a distinction between 'natural' virtue and 'full' virtue. He allows that we can have good dispositions from birth; e.g. someone might be naturally kind. But this doesn't amount to 'full virtue'. A naturally kind child doesn't fully comprehend the nature of their action, and could easily be misled into being kind for the wrong reasons or at the wrong time. Without practical wisdom, we can't have full virtue.

But practical wisdom also depends on virtue. It is possible to deliberate from the wrong ends. A bad person can be very clever in achieving what they want. But cleverness is not practical wisdom, because practical wisdom also involves having general knowledge about what is good. This depends upon being virtuous, because what appears good to someone depends on their character traits. So on Aristotle's theory, we become both good and practically wise together.