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Reflections on Reflective Practice (4/7)

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Part 4: Philosophy of practice and Aristotelian virtue ethics A recurrent theme in these reflections has been the need for grounding our notion of reflective practice in practical philosophy, in addition to its current grounding in "personal knowledge" (Polanyi, 1958, 1966; Schön, 1983, 1987) and "applied science" (Popper, 1959/2002a, 1963/2002b, 1972; Habermas, 1971, 1984, 1987; Ulrich, 2008a-c). But what is practical philosophy; can philosophy be practical at all?

Introduction: "practical" philosophy? Practical philosophy is the branch of philosophy that is dealing with the "practical" employment of reason (e.g., in everyday action, politics, economics, management, and medicine) as distinguished from its theoretical or speculative employment in inquiry and applied science (e.g., in science and technology). In philosophical terminology, practical is everything that pertains to human action. Human activity is action rather than mere behavior when it is intentional, that is, oriented towards purposes that are chosen consciously and of free will, "purposefully." We might thus say that practical philosophy is the philosophical study of purposeful human activity. The idea, of course, is not just to analyze action theoretically but also to orient it practically. Well-understood practical philosophy aims to be philosophy for practice as well as philosophy about practice. In sum, philosophy is practical inasmuch as it not only analyses but also provides orientation to human action.

The quest for practical reason: When we study a subject philosophically, we usually examine it with a special interest in the part that reason – careful and self-reflective judgment – plays in it. For example, we study epistemology (theory of knowledge) as a philosophical rather than, say, a psychological or a historical subject if our particular interest is in understanding and supporting the part reason plays in gaining knowledge. Similarly, a philosophical study of human action will ask what part reason plays in it and how we can strengthen its role in practice. Practical philosophy is thus the branch of philosophy that is dealing with action

inasmuch as it is or aims to be reasonable. The next question, then, is what do practical philosophers mean when they say an action is "reasonable"?

Perhaps the simplest way to put it is that we act reasonably if we (or those involved) determine an action's ends and means with reason rather than relying on means that are inimical to carefully reasoned judgment, such as impulsive behavior, coercion, manipulation, deception, withholding of crucial evidence or information, reference to authority in replacement of argument, or hindrance of free and authentic communication. To reason is to ground one's judgments in a deliberative effort that considers all available evidence, is coherent, and is open to the views and critique of others, so that as a result we should be able to argue – explain and justify – our reasons. Ideally, reasons are "good grounds" that both those involved and all others concerned can follow.

When we are able to advance good grounds for our actions, we also say we act *rationally*. "Reasonable" and "rational" are closely related concepts; in everyday language we often use them as synonyms. For the sake of precision, I will distinguish them by giving a slightly more technical meaning to rationality: we are "rational" to the extent we can argue our good grounds (if challenged to do so) cogently, that is, on the basis of clear evidence and principles, in a way that is logically compelling and consistent with available knowledge. It is rational, for example, to adapt our choice of means to the ends, which means we can advance evidence and arguments (e.g., based on knowledge of cause-effect relations, on observations about the obtaining situation, and on logical inference) as to why a certain way of acting is conducive to achieving a desired result. Or we consider a problem solution "rational" if we can explain why and in what ways it serves to solve or alleviate a problem, and so on. By contrast, I suggest we give a less technical and wider sense to "reasonable": we call an action "reasonable" if it is *rational in a comprehensive sense* that includes both the adaptation of means to our ends (instrumental rationality) *an*d the adaptation of our ends to considerations that reach beyond our individual interests or desires of the moment and ask what are "good grounds" also in the eyes of other people concerned and in the long run (substantive rationality). We might thus say that being rational refers primarily to procedure – the way we argue and act, the methods we use, and so on – whereas being reasonable refers primarily to substance – the content and outcome of what we do or propose to do. It is not a strict distinction and certainly not an opposition but rather a nuance of

interpretation that I have in mind; for ultimately, if good grounds are to be reasons that in the ideal all can follow, the two notions will have to converge.

The point is, real-world practice is rarely ideal. In real-word practice, our reasons – carefully deliberated as they may be – are hardly ever convincing to all those concerned. People live in different circumstances, and accordingly have different experiences and notions of improvement. Because this is so, acting "with reason" (or rationally in the mentioned wider sense) is not just a matter of disciplined judgment – of intellectual clarity and coherence regarding the ends of means of our actions – but also has something to do with the ways we handle our differences. Conflict, not just uncertainty about proper action, is the stuff of practical philosophy.

Let us sum up what we have said so far about the quest for practical reason: We act reasonably, or rationally in a comprehensive sense, if we act on the basis of good personal grounds – a clear *prospect* of the ends and reasons of our actions – *and* of simultaneous *respect* for the different views and needs of other people. To the extent we live up to this twofold concern, we practice *practical reason.* We are of course talking about an *ideal.* Hence, we cannot as a rule expect ourselves or others to fully live up to the idea of practical reason. Furthermore, because people are different and live in different circumstances, trying to approximate the ideal in concrete contexts of action may mean different things to different people; which is to say, the ideal requires interpretation. Consequently, to be able to decide among differing interpretations, we cannot help but ultimately presuppose some evaluative (i.e., normative = norm-giving) standards of practical reason, that is, we need to reflect on our *value basis.*

The value basis of practical reason: There are basically two options for clarifying the value basis of our notion of practical reason. We may associate certain values with the quest for practical reason in general, whether as a personal act of faith or, philosophically more compelling, as a consequence of methodological analysis, that is, because we find some values are inextricably built into the idea(l) of practical reason as such. Alternatively, we may associate the value content of practical reason with what people make of it in specific contexts of action, that is, we look for the changing normative assumptions that guide us in a concrete situation. Frequently these two issues are not distinguished very clearly, but I find it

essential to do so. The distinction frees us from the apparent need for starting out with some sweeping value judgments – an ideology of practical reason in general, as it were – and instead allows us to take a more subtle approach. This approach says that while there is indeed a value core in any concept of rationality (e.g., that we aim to resolve our differences through the force of argument rather than the force of violence; normative core = peace!), the major source of normative implications resides in the way we *practice* practical reason in specific contexts of action.

We can then combine the two options in the following way. Basically, to clarify the value basis of practical reason, it is methodologically sufficient to ask ourselves what is the *minimal* core of values that we associate with the idea of practical reason as such (i.e., with *any* effort to practice practical reason); for the rest, we can then make the process of value clarification a critical task of reasonable practice itself (i.e., an issue to be dealt with in concrete contexts of action, by those involved along with all the parties concerned).

The first issue, regarding the *indispensable normative core of practical reason as such*, requires us to be clear about the way we understand the nature (structure and content) of reasonable practice in general. This issue is of a theoretical nature and thus calls for a minimum of philosophy *of* practice, that is, basic views about the possible role of reason in practice.

The second issue, regarding the *specific normative content of our own practice*, requires us to be clear about the ways we identify and handle the normative validity claims on which, in a concrete context of action, depend our practical propositions, decisions, and actions. This issue is of a practical nature and thus calls for a minimum of philosophy *in* practice, that is, methodological principles and tools to support reflective practice.

Philosophy *of* practice, philosophy *in* practice Traditionally, practical philosophy has mainly been philosophy *of* practice. As such it has usually been treated as an abstract academic subject – a matter of theoretical thought about the nature of practical reason – that is far removed from everyday practice. Even so, theorizing about practice is not without merits; it can give us a basic framework for thinking about and evaluating our practice, and thus may help us to gain some critical distance from our usual practice. Nevertheless, I would not want to define practical philosophy (or even philosophy as a whole) in one-sidedly theoretical terms. Clearly,

philosophizing *about* practice is not enough. We must also try to understand "practical" philosophy *as* a practice itself; that is, as a philosophy that comes to life only to the extent we cultivate it in our research and professional practice.

Thus understood, practical philosophy cannot remain philosophy *of* practice but must become philosophy *in* practice. As such it really begins when we first question a specific practice with regard to its adequacy and significance in the widest sense of the term – what makes it meaningful, valid, and valuable? Theory (philosophy of practice) will hopefully furnish some guidelines for such reflection; but it cannot give us all the answers, for every context of action is different. Nor can theory be responsible; only acting people can, in specific contexts of action. *Practice ultimately must itself care for its reasons.* Only thus can it become reflective practice in the full sense of the term. It follows that if practical philosophy is to support such reflection, it must take the step from being philosophy *of* practice to becoming philosophy *in* practice.

I find it helpful, therefore, to think of practical philosophy – and of philosophy in general – in the way Simon Blackburn describes it in one of the happiest definitions of philosophy that I have come across:

> ***"Philosophy is what happens when a practice becomes self-conscious."***
> (Blackburn, 1994, p. 286)

Indeed! It seems to me such a notion of philosophy corresponds well to our concern with the practice of research and professional intervention, as well as with the hope that eventually, something like a "philosophy for professionals" (Ulrich, 2007) will emerge to support practicing researchers. We may thus, with Blackburn (1994, p. 286), understand practical philosophy to mean a philosophically informed effort of *second-order reflection* on the nature of reflective professional practice, both in general (philosophy of practice) and in specific contexts of action (philosophy in practice). In a short formula:

$$\textit{Practical philosophy} = \{\textit{reflective practice}\}^2 = RP^2$$

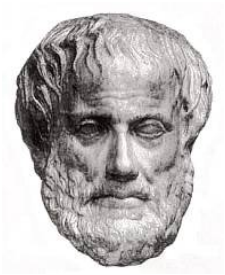
Methodologically speaking, the challenge that I associate with the quest for RP^2 consists in *pragmatizing practical reason* so that ordinary people (including ordinary professionals and decision-makers) can practice it. Lest

we become *terribles simplificateurs*, such pragmatization has to happen in a philosophically well-understood way; which is why some basic knowledge of philosophy of practice cannot do harm.

Philosophy *of* practice: about the nature of reasonable practice There is a difficulty in giving a short overview of practical philosophy, in that this branch of philosophy has produced a range of rather different conceptions of reasonable practice, rather than a homogeneous body of theory. Given this difficulty, it may be best to look at a small but representative selection of practical philosophies, such as the history of practical philosophizing has brought them forth, rather than searching for an illusive, comprehensive theory of reasonable practice. This should still provide us with a kind of minimal propedeutics for philosophical practice, for several reasons. First, considering different theoretical approaches may drive our thinking about practice no less than being able to rely on a single theoretical conception; in fact the differences in question may help us in gaining or maintaining some critical distance and thus encourage reflective practice. Second, although theoretical understanding is never the same as actual practice, theoretical ideas as to what constitutes adequate practice may shape the way we act as much as situation-specific considerations. Third and finally, the effort we want to undertake is a bit like learning a new language: although the only way to become proficient is through practice, a basic introduction to its grammar and way of talking gives us a better start. Since there exist different languages of practical philosophy, it may not be a bad idea to familiarize ourselves with a few of the major languages that are spoken in the field.

The main "languages" I have in mind are those of Aristotle, Kant, and Habermas. To me, they are "the big three" of practical philosophy. It seems to me that their ideas, in addition to shaping the development of the field, continue to be relevant today. They provide the cornerstones of a history of thought that stretches over nearly 2500 years, beginning in Ancient Greece with an attempt to understand good practice as *virtuous* practice and concluding, for the time being, with present-day attempts to understand it as *discursive* practice, which may ultimately lead us back to a core of indispensable personal virtues. Another major source that has influenced me is the thinking of the American pragmatists Peirce, James, and Dewey; I will consider it in the final article of this series, where we will try to "pragmatize" practical philosophy in a philosophically well-understood way.

As I see it, *rendering practical philosophy practical* is an uncompleted philosophical project on which all of the mentioned thinkers have something essential to say, although some new ideas are also needed.



Aristotle of Stagira (384 - 322 B.C.)

Aristotle's *phronesis* and the doctrine of the mean Both in his theoretical philosophy, which deals with the principles and phenomena of nature (including human nature) and comprises disciplines such as physics, biology, and psychology, and in his practical philosophy, which deals with matters of human conduct and action and comprises disciplines such as ethics, politics, and economics, Aristotle's basic method is *functional* and *teleological* thinking. That is, we can best understand the phenomena of our world – natural events as well as human nature and activities – by asking what functions (= non-intentional ends) or ends (intentions) they serve. For example, form and function of natural phenomena are closely related; in this sense, the logic of the natural world is no less end-directed, "teleo-logical," than is the logic of human practice, which we cannot understand without considering the intentions (motives, emotions, attitudes and values) that guide us, as well as the ends that our behaviors and actions ultimately promote through their consequences. Similarly, we cannot adequately understand our human nature in terms of biological conditions and needs alone, that is, in terms of what we need for survival from the moment we are born until death (although these conditions and needs, too, require a functional perspective); we equally need to consider our natural orientation towards growth and fulfillment as rational and political beings, that is, the ways we can fully develop our humanity through education and through responsible participation in the *polis* (a self-governed community of free and equal citizens).

The teleology of good practice: Human activities may have many different ends, most of which are means to other ends. If we ask people why they pursue this or that end (say, "Why do you learn Spanish?"), they will say "because it allows me to achieve X" (e.g, "because I want to travel in Latin America") or "because it makes me feel like Y" (e.g., "because it gives me

pleasure") and so on. These latter ends will in turn be motivated by higher or more general ends (e.g., "I want to continue my education" or "to enlarge my horizon") and so on, until one eventually arrives at an ultimate end that one cannot explain any more in this way. We cannot rationally explain our ends without assuming some *highest good* at the top of our personal pyramid of values, that is, a hierarchy of goods that we find worthwhile to strive for. On this notion of a highest good depends all appropriate deliberation about human affairs; accordingly important it is for practical philosophy to reflect on its nature. Aristotle finds this highest good in *eudaimonia*, a state of well-being (usually translated as "happiness") that is grounded in conducting a good and virtuous life – which is why Aristotle points out that it is more adequate to think of happiness "as an activity rather than a state" (Aristotle, 1985, X.6, 1176b1).

Eudaimonia, or the quest for happiness: The standard English translation of *eudaimonia* as "happiness" does not fully capture Aristotle's intent, which goes beyond the everyday search for success and pleasure (good fortune and well-being, that is) and includes the idea of *virtue.* Aristotle's term is *arete,* or excellence; to be truly happy, we need to conduct a life of moral and intellectual excellence. "Happiness is not sent by the gods, but instead results from virtue and some sort of learning or cultivation." (I.9, 1099b15)

Aristotle does of course recognize how important happiness in the everyday sense of pleasure and well-being is as a force that motivates our actions; however, he also observes that this kind of happiness depends on fortunate circumstances beyond our control and is thus variable and unreliable, whereas the virtuous conduct of life – a life of activities that makes us *worthy* of happiness – is not. It is entirely up to us whether we want to conduct our life virtuously; and if we do, nobody and nothing can take such virtue away from us. We might thus say that in Aristotle's conception of good practice, the essential motive is a comprehensive notion of the human quest for happiness. Well-understood happiness does not search for short-term gratification but aims to make us independent of the whims of fortune – *autarkes* in Greek, that is, self-governed, autonomous. The ideal is a good life that includes all the conditions of its own goodness, as it were, and hence frees us from needing to look for ever more gratifying or higher goods. A thus-understood good life is the only end that is self-sufficient, because it is in itself completely satisfying and thus an *end in itself:*

> Every craft and every investigation, and likewise every action and decision, seems to aim at some good; hence the good has been well described as that at which everything aims.
>
> [....] Though apparently there are many ends, we choose some of them, e.g. wealth, flutes and, in general, instruments, because of something else; hence it is clear that not all ends are complete. But the best good is apparently something complete. Hence, if only one end is complete, this will be what we are looking for; and if more than one are complete, the most complete of these will be what we are looking for.
>
> […] Now happiness more than anything else seems unconditionally complete, since we always [choose it, and also] choose it because of itself, never because of something else.
>
> Honor, pleasure, understanding and every virtue we certainly choose because of themselves, since we would choose each of them even if it had no further result, but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, by contrast, no one ever chooses for their sake, or for the sake of anything else at all. (Aristotle, 1985, I.1, 1094a1-3 and I.7, 1097a25-b7)

The role of reason: A clearer account of the nature of good practice as Aristotle understands it needs to look at the part that human reason plays in it. The place to start with is again Aristotle's functional and teleological outlook. There is a distinctive human capacity (or "function," *ergon,* in Aristotle's term) that allows us to conduct our life well and in a virtuous way; this is our capacity to *deliberate* about the means and ends of our actions (*praxis* = action). It is through careful deliberation and conforming practice that we progress in the process of unfolding our human nature and thereby learn to "function well" in the way only humans (as distinct from animals and plants) can, namely, by acting in accordance with *reason:*

> {To say} that the best good is happiness is apparently something [generally] agreed, {so much so that it is almost a truism; we therefore need} a clearer statement of what the best good is. Well, perhaps we shall find the best good if we first find the *function* of a human being. For just as the good, i.e.[doing] well, for a flautist, a sculptor, and every craftsman, and in general for whatever has a function and [characteristic] action, seems to depend on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function.
>
> {…} What, then, could this be? For living is apparently shared with plants, but what we are looking for is the special function of a human being; hence we should set aside the life of nutrition and growth. The life next in order is some sort of life of sense-perception; but his too is apparently shared, with horse, ox and every animal. The remaining possibility, then, is some sort of *life of action* {that is an authentic expression of the human soul and} that has reason. (Aristotle, 1985, I.7, 1097b23-1098a3, italics added; edited passages in { })

In Aristotle's functional perspective, what distinguishes us from all other living beings is that the human soul is composed of both nonrational *and rational* parts. Nature has endowed our soul with the special skills of reasoning and of being receptive to good reasons. Accordingly, it is deeply entrenched in human nature that we should pursue the quest for a good and

virtuous life with all the rational and nonrational (emotional) capacities of our soul. There is, then, a fundamental connection between virtue and practical reason. This is why Aristotle's practical philosophy becomes *virtue ethics.* We are virtuous when we reason well, and we reason well when we are virtuous. Practical reason as Aristotle understands it is the coming together of reason and virtue in the conduct of human affairs, an understanding of rationality that culminates in the bold proposition:

"We cannot be intelligent without being good."
(Aristotle, 1985, VI.12, 1144a36)

The nature of virtues: Generally speaking, virtues are those qualities which matter for excellence. Not only humans, but also animals and all things may have degrees of virtue. A knife that cuts well has excellence; its virtue consists in the qualities that matter for its proper functioning – its design, the materials from which it is made, and the care with which it has been produced. Similarly, in the field of arts and crafts, virtues are those skills which allow us to be *good at* what we do, whether we are playing the flute or assembling a knife. When it comes to human action, however, virtue goes beyond being good at what we try to achieve; for the proper function of a human being is "the soul's activity that expresses reason" (I.7, 1098a8). Virtue in art and craft is about being *good at something;* virtue in reasonable action is about being a *good person.*

Being a good person is not a matter of some momentary excellence but of a life-long quest for completion:

> We take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be the soul's activity and actions that express reason; the excellent man's function is to do this finely and well. Each function is completed well when its completion expresses the proper virtue. Therefore the human good turns out to be the soul's activity that expresses virtue. And if there are more virtues than one, the good will express the best and most complete virtue. Moreover, it will be in a complete life. For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy. (Aristotle, 1985, I.7, 1098a12-21, slightly edited)

Virtue, then, is a much broader concept for Aristotle than moral action; it encompasses everything that is conducive to a good life. That includes non-human functions and qualities (things well done that add to the quality of human life) as well as all those human qualities and activities that are apt to make us happy, including a broad range of *virtues of character* as well as *virtues of thought.* The only restriction is that "by virtue we mean virtue of the soul, not of the body, since we also say that happiness is an activity of the

soul." (I.13, 1102a15f) Intelligence, knowledge, comprehension, considerateness, and expertise, for example, are virtues of thought (i.e., intellectual and deliberative virtues, VI.1-11); they reside in that part of the human soul which is endowed with the faculty of reason and accordingly they are acquired by instruction, study, and training, an effort that takes time and experience. Courage, moderation, and generosity, on the other hand, are examples of virtues of character (i.e., emotional and moral virtues); they reside in that part of the human soul which, although not rational itself, is receptive to good reasons, and accordingly they are acquired by education and by "habituation," that is, by following the model of a parent, a teacher, or (most important once we are adult) a virtuous person (I.13, 1103a5-b25; note that the Greek word for "habit" in the sense of a positive disposition or stance is *ethos*, cf. 1103a16).

Aristotle's list of virtues: Any conceivable list of virtues is bound to be influenced by the tradition and *zeitgeist* within which the author is working. This holds true particularly for virtues of character. While Aristotle's list of intellectual virtues still looks amazingly familiar and relevant today – he distinguishes *episteme* (scientific knowledge and research), *techne* (craft knowledge, i.e., art or technical skill), *phronesis* (practical intelligence or prudence), *nous* (understanding of first principles), and *sophia* (wisdom), of which only episteme and phronesis are actually required for proper action while the other intellectual virtues serve "calculation" (production) and "contemplation" (science and wisdom) rather than practice – the same cannot be said for his list of character virtues. It is rather difficult for us today to appreciate the particular virtues of character discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics.* We can only try to interpret them against the background of our fragmentary knowledge of the very different cultural setting of ancient Greek society (see, e.g., Macintyre, 1981, esp. chapters 1 and 10-12) and then reformulate them so that they appear more or less plausible and relevant to our contemporary notions of good practice.

In fact, the difficulties already begin with the task of extracting Aristotle's list of virtues from the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics;* it appears that the virtues he had in mind were so obvious to his contemporaries that they did not need the kind of systematic introduction and justification we might expect today. Perhaps this is why most editors and commentators do not offer a list or merely reproduce that of Thomson (Aristotle, 1976, p. 104; similarly Prior, 1991, p. 165), a list that I find incomplete and rather

outdated in its language. Given this situation, I have assembled my own list in *Table 1*, based mainly on Irwin's (Aristotle, 1985) translation. I offer it for illustrative purposes only, with no scholarly claims attached to it. Unlike Thomson's table, I have not limited my list to Aristotle's virtues of character but have included all the virtues Aristotle considers directly relevant to virtuous practice, including the two intellectual virtues in question (as explained above). Not included are virtues relevant to instrumental production or theoretical contemplation only. Furthermore, no attempt is involved to establish a list of relevant virtues for sound professional practice today, which is why I will not discuss the listed virtues in any detail here. Our main interest is of a methodological (procedural) rather than substantive (normative) nature.

Table 1: Aristotle's List of Practical Virtues

For each aspect of practice, the 'mean' stands for a virtue, the other two for vices.
Source: abstracted from the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*
Attitudes marked < > are not assigned a definitive name by Aristotle.

Aspect of practice (activities or dispositions)	**Deficiency** (vice: too little)	**Mean** (virtue: balance)	**Excess** (vice: too much)	**Classification**
Resolution (confidence & fear)	<Cowardice>	Courage	<Rashness>	Virtues concerned with feelings
Self-control (pleasure & pain)	<Insensibility>	Moderation (restraint)	Lack of moderation	
Expenditure (small scale/private)	Ungenerosity	Generosity	Wastefulness	Virtues concerned with external goods (wealth, honor, success)
Expenditure (large scale/public)	Niggardliness	Magnificence	Vulgarity	
Honor (large scale)	Small-mindedness	Magnanimity	Vanity	
Ambition (success orientation)	Unambitiousness	<Proper modesty and ambition>	Overambition	
Temper (anger)	<Apathy>	Patience (gentleness)	Irritability	Virtues concerned with social life
Social Conduct (friendliness)	Unfriendliness	<Amiability>	Flattery	
Truth-telling (self-expression)	Understatement (self-deprecation)	Sincerity (truthfulness)	Pretence (boastfulness)	
Conversation (amusement)	Boorishness	Wit	Buffoonery	
Shame (humility)	Shamelessness	Modesty	Shyness	Other dispositions concerned with social life (special cases: evils, political life, friendship)
Others' good fortune (resentment)	Spite	Proper indignation	Envy	
Justice (as lawfulness)	Doing injustice	Lawfulness (observance of law)	Suffering injustice	
Justice (as fairness)	<Selfishness>	Fairness (proportionate equality)	<Corrective action>	
Friendship (companionship)	<Interest> (for pleasure or profit)	Good will (mutual)	<Self-sacrifice> (for the other's sake)	
Expertise (episteme)	<...>	Theoretical intelligence (knowledge)	<...>	Intellectual virtues concerned with practice
Prudence (phronesis)	<Cleverness>	Practical intelligence (right choice of means and ends)	<...>	

Virtue and good deliberation, or the art of decision making: Bringing to bear virtue in practice requires careful deliberation about the situation at hand. We cannot act properly without first trying to achieve a balanced view of the situation, considering all the particular circumstances – a matter of *judgment* rather than science or calculation. To be sure, good judgment may be informed by science and thus takes *inquiry;* but its essence lies in *virtue*, that is, in properly deliberated motives and ends (dispositions). The virtues called for are both virtues of character and virtues of thought; for "good deliberation requires reason" (VI.9, 1142b13). But we must also make sure we use our reason to promote the correct end, that is, the highest good (1142b30). Reason, then, is inseparable from "the correct judgment of the decent person," whereby "what is decent is the common concern of all good people in relations with other people" (VI.11, 1143a20 and a31). *The excellent person (phrónimos) is the standard*, that is, the person that by her virtue of character as well as by virtue of her expertise and experience knows to judge a certain kind of situation in a balanced way characterized by both "comprehension" and "consideration" (1143a25). Good deliberation, in sum, is judgment of particular circumstances based on both reason and virtue. To the extent we succeed in bringing together reason and virtue in this way, we achieve what Aristotle calls practical intelligence or prudence *(phronesis).*

Phronesis or practical intelligence: Let us look a bit closer at the nature of practical intelligence (or prudence) as Aristotle understands it, and of the "good deliberation" that is conducive to it. Unlike other uses of reason, practical intelligence "is prescriptive, since its end is [to determine] what must be done or not done in action" (VI.10, 1143a8, similarly I.2, 1094b5). It is the art of good decision making, for it is concerned with the right choice of means and ends of action.

Note that *phronesis* is never just prudence in a merely instrumental or calculating sense. It goes beyond what in everyday English we also call "cleverness" and in contemporary philosophical terms characterize as instrumental reason (or instrumental rationality), a use of intelligence that identifies rationality with the efficacy of means, regardless of what the ends are. I mention this because a cursory reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* might indeed convey the mistaken impression that Aristotle adheres to a rather positivistic means-end scheme, for example when he apparently explains the role of deliberation in decision making as clarifying what we

can do rather than what we *want to* do: "We deliberate not about ends, but about what promotes ends." (III.3, 1112b12, similarly 1112b34) It is perhaps a bit unfortunate that in Thomson's (Aristotle, 1976, p. 119) widely used translation, this quote reads "we deliberate not about ends but about means" and moreover is preceded by the following subtitle, inserted by the translator: "Deliberation is about means, not ends." This is accurate only inasmuch as Aristotle has previously defined the ultimate end as *eudaimonia* and all other ends have means character in relation to it. Plenty of astonishingly modern formulations in the *Nicomachean Ethics* make it clear that for Aristotle, good deliberation is not just about doing things right but always also about doing the right thing:

> Good deliberation is correctness that reflects what is beneficial, about *{doing} the right thing, in the right way and at the right time.* (Aristotle, 1985, VI.9, 1142b28; italics and expression in { } added)

We must be careful, then, that we do not turn Aristotle into a positivist against his will. Perhaps a less misleading way to capture Aristotle's meaning would read: "Deliberation is about adequate means to secure practical intelligence, that is, to orient our practice towards *eudaimonia."* This is what *phronesis* is all about.

It is indeed obvious to Aristotle – so obvious that he does not repeat it on every occasion – that proper deliberation about means is always concerned with the right ends, those which lead us toward *eudaimonia*. This is why we need to deliberate so carefully about our choice of means; for finding out what makes us truly happy is among the most difficult questions we face in life, time and again. Were it otherwise, that is, if intelligent choice of means were merely concerned in securing the efficacy (effectiveness and efficiency) of means to serve any purpose, then scientific and craft knowledge would do and no particular effort to secure practical intelligence or prudence would be required at all.

The emergence of the problem of practical reason: Aristotle recognizes that the judgmental and decision-oriented nature of practical intelligence has important *methodological implications:* practical intelligence cannot be modeled after the sciences and the crafts but needs to find its own principles and methods of proper reasoning. In the sciences and the crafts we need not "deliberate" at all in an Aristotelian sense; for in science it is nature (through observation and experiment) and in craft it is the product which tell us whether we have understood or done well or not. In human affairs,

however, we need to deliberate about proper ways to act because nature does not tell us; that is, because we are *free* to give our own answers. In the terms of Aristotle, the object and end of deliberation is *choice* (or decision making): "What we deliberate about is the same as what we decide to do, except that by the time we decide to do it, it is definite...." (III.3, 1113a3). Practical intelligence, then, is concerned with what the German practical philosopher Otfried Höffe (1979, p. 8) has called the *rationality of freedom.*

We encounter here the very origin of the problem of practical reasoning as an independent form of deliberation: *by virtue* of our reason we are free to act. When it comes to action, it is only through an effort of reasoning informed by virtue (and conversely, virtue supported by reasoning) that we can hope to be guided toward the right use of this freedom, that is, toward *eudaimonia.* 2000 years before Kant, Aristotle thus laid the ground for what Kant would later describe as the self-legislating power of reason in its practical employment. It is with Aristotle that the notion of *practical reason,* and with it the idea of *practical philosophy* as a particular philosophical discipline, first saw the light of the day.

The method of prudence: "the mean relative to us" In comparison with the sciences and the crafts, the subject-matter and end of practical philosophy are of an entirely different nature. Prudence or practical intelligence, the subject-matter of practical philosophy, is not concerned with "observing" (in the double sense of recognizing and using for productive ends) the eternal laws of nature. Rather, as we have seen, it "legislates what must be done and what avoided" in concrete contexts of action (I.2, 1094b5, cf. VI.10, 1143a8). We must accordingly limit our demands for exact scientific methods and findings. What a virtuous person will find to be reasonable action, or what a reasonable person will find to constitute virtuous practice, depends on a balanced appreciation of all circumstances, and these are unique and forever changing (II.7, 1107a28-32). The virtues themselves, due to their being expressions of the human soul (character) and mind (reason) rather than of physical properties of the body, cannot be described objectively and quantitatively as in a scientific account; instead, we must look for accounts that fit the subject-matter (I.3, 1094b13-22). For example, such accounts can provide mere "outlines" of proper reasoning and action (I.1, 1094b19-21; II.2, 1104a1-3; X.9, 1179a33f); they need to apply "topical" thinking, that is, learn about proper ways of thinking in conjunction with specific issues and "reputable

opinions" about them rather than through analytical thinking only (Aristotle, 1984); they need to grasp the particular aspects of a situation and therefore require personal experience (VI.11, 1143a25-b14); their results will as a rule be plausible rather than objectively true or reasonable, in that they "hold good usually but not universally" (I.3, 1094b21f); and they can only be completed and validated through practice, that is, through processes of deliberation and decision-making that take place under specific local and historical circumstances and for this reason cannot be replaced by general arguments and accounts (X.8, 1179a20-22; X.9, 1179b1-5). For all these reasons, practical philosophy requires methodological principles that are different from those of the sciences and the crafts; less exact, but not less adequate to their subject-matter. "The educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows." (I.3, 1094b24f)

Aristotle's key principle is the so-called *doctrine of the means* (II.6, 1106a27-1107a7; II.8, 1108b11; VI.1, 1138b18-20). It demands that in conducting our human affairs, we first ask ourselves what kind of qualities matter for excellency (virtuous action) and accordingly, what motives, feelings and attitudes should guide our actions. In regard to these relevant conditions, we should then try to avoid deficiencies as well as excesses, that is, strike a balance between the extreme notions of "what must be done and what avoided." In a situation that requires courage, for example, we should avoid both cowardice (i.e., a lack of resolution) and rashness (i.e., a lack of deliberation). The way to achieve excellence is not by looking for some particularly outstanding or extreme achievement but rather for a balanced mean stance:

> As far as its substance and the account stating its essence are concerned, virtue is a mean; but as far as the best [condition] and the good [result] are concerned, it is an extremity." (Aristotle, 1985, II.6, 1107a7)

This pursuit of the "golden mean," as it is also called popularly (although not by Aristotle himself as far as I am aware), is not a mechanical search for the middle in the sense of equidistance (equal distance) from the opposite extremes of deficiency and excess; rather, it looks for the *means relative to us* (II.6, 1106a32 and b7), that is, a stance adequate to the acting individual as well as to the other parties concerned. (Note that Aristotle, although he is often accused of ethical subjectivism, speaks of "the means relative to us" rather than "to me"). Aristotle illustrates the relative character of the mean with the example of balanced nuitrition for a sportsman:

> Relative to us [is] what is neither superfluous nor deficient; this is not one and the same for everyone.... If, e.g., ten pounds [of food] are a lot for someone to eat, and two pounds a little, it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six, since this might also be either a little or a lot for the person who is to take it – for Milo [the athlete] a little, but for the beginner in gymnastics a lot; and the same is true for running and wrestling. In this way every scientific expert avoids excess and deficiency and seeks and chooses what is intermediate – but intermediate *relative to us*, not in the object. (Aristotle, 1985, II.6, 1106a32-b7, slightly edited)

As has to be expected due to the nature of the problem of practical reasoning, looking for "the means relative to us" is a merely approximate principle, in the double sense that its application requires judgment and that even with good judgment, it may not always yield satisfactory results. For example, as Aristotle recognizes, it does not apply well to actions or feelings that are evil in themselves, such as adultery, theft, or murder (among actions) and shamelessness or envy (among feelings); it makes little sense to speak of an adequate mean amount of such actions or feelings (II.6, 1107a9-26), for by their very nature they are entirely inadequate. Further, there are goods that may obtain more or less but hardly ever too much, such as impartiality or responsibility; we cannot easily think of them in terms of deficiency-mean-excess, which may explain why Aristotle does not mention them at all among the virtues (nor does he consider them as examples of inadequate application of the doctrine of means). Finally, it is obvious that it takes some *prior* judgment of the situation before we can even begin to properly apply the doctrine of the means; we first need to know what kinds of activities and dispositions the situation requires before we can judge their adequate dosis, as it were; but the question of what situational aspects and responses furnish the suitable raw material for the doctrine's application is of course essential for the way we see and handle a situation.

The crucial difficulty of practical reason may well be to determine which of the many aspects of a situation merit particular attention and appreciation. This appears to require some criteria of assessment and preference that go beyond the idea of taking a blanced stance with respect to all the aspects in question. Aristotle may tacitly assume his list of virtues offers a sort of complete checklist to this end; in any case, he does not tell us much about the obvious limitations of the doctrine of the mean. Still, understood as what it claims to be and nothing more – a merely approximate principle – the doctrine of the mean makes sense and furnishes indeed a generic principle, even in identifying the "raw material" for its own application: it is never a bad idea to rely on a balanced consideration of all *potentially* relevant

aspects of a situation before focusing on any particular aspects and trying to handle them in a balanced way. That we may need some additional criteria and methods constitutes no argument against the reasonableness of Aristotle's basic principle of practical reason.

Aristotle does in a sense respond to the difficulty, as we have seen, by making it clear that the best way to practice practical reason – to apply the doctrine of the mean, that is – is by asking ourselves how a *phrónimos* (i.e., a truly reasonable, experienced, and virtuous person) would handle the situation or issue in question. It is thus not good enough just to refer to our own efforts of deliberation, we also need to learn from the best (III.4, 1113a25). In distinction to contemporary practical philosophy, which focuses on principles of moral reasoning, "for Aristotle the moral agent, rather than a set of moral principles, is the primary source of moral knowledge." (Prior, 1991, P. 157)

Still, Aristotle also makes it very clear that excellence in matters practical – *phronesis* – is not just a state or characteristic we have or do not have as persons; rather, it is an activity that always involves deliberation and decision-making (II.6, 1106b36-1107a3). In so far *phronesis* clearly is an issue of methodological interest, calling for adequate training and support. However limited the methodological reach and merit of the doctrine of "the mean relative to us" may be, at least it is apt to remind us that there *is* such a thing as a proper – and properly argued – way to act, so that we better analyze carefully what options we have to act in a situation and what their different outcomes might be, rather than just relying on our current moral intuitions or other kinds of preferences.

True, the notion of the "mean relative to us" tells us virtually nothing about how we ought to act in a specific situation and in fact, not even about how we should assess the situation; for it offers no advice about how we should chose the aspects of the situation to which we might then want to apply a balanced judgment. Methodologically speaking, then, it probably does not carry as far as Aristotle appears to have assumed. Even so, I would not go as far and characterize it, with Thomson (1976, p. 25), as a mere metaphor. Compared to later attempts to work out generic ethical or meta-ethical principles, the notion of the "mean relative to us" has certainly the advantage of being sufficiently close to the moral intuition of most people to offer itself as a guideline that everyone can apply to test specific actions or

proposals. Moreover, it is also true that the same objection can be raised against virtually all principles of practical reasoning of which I can think, including Kant's (1786, 1788) categorical imperative. The point is, to the extent we expect moral principles to be generic (i.e., to apply to all kinds of situation), we cannot at the same time expect them to be specific about the substance of practical reason, whether we conceive of it with Kant in terms of moral action or with Aristotle in terms of *phronesis*. Generic principles of practical reason have a regulative rather than constitutive character, that is, we can use them to "test" specific proposals but not to determine and justify their content. Thus understood, Aristotle's contribution will indeed be of interest to us in the last contribution to this series, where I will invite you to take with me the decisive methodological step to which I refer as the "critical turn" of our understanding of practical reason.

Personal appreciation: It seems to me Aristotle's message is as relevant today as it has ever been: *virtue matters*. It certainly can serve as a source for orienting our thinking about our practice. In what ways do our practical propositions – from problem definitions to proposals for action and evaluations of success – promote certain virtues and neglect others? What virtues should we take to count in a specific context of action, and how do they translate into a balanced judgment of the situation?

Asking ourselves such questions has little to do with unworldly altruism or idealism, as some readers might suspect. As Aristotle makes quite clear, virtue is never just an altruistic disposition or talent that we may have been given by good fate; rather:

"It is hard work to be excellent."
(Aristotle, 1985, II.9, 1109a24)

Far from being easy, to be excellent in Aristotle's sense takes personal and methodological discipline; an effort of learning and inquiry; the use of expertise and deliberation; as well as personal qualities such as courage, sincerity, steadiness, good will, and quite generally an ethical stance. Or, in the terms we are using in this series of reflections, it obliges us to engage in a life-long *quest for competence* (Ulrich, 2001). Aristotle invites us to make virtue a part of this quest. As little as virtue to Aristotle is an ideal that would be inimical to personal happiness, it needs to run counter to professional competence and success. It does not ask us to be unworldly idealists and to renounce the double quest for happiness and competence but

rather, to pursue this double quest in a reflecting and disciplined way and *in the long run.* What it precludes is not professional success and personal happiness but rather, opportunism; it urges us not to deviate from the path of excellence just because the circumstances may tempt or pressure us to do so. This is the way of *eudaimonia* and *phronesis* as we might try to understand it as professionals today.

Within a professional context, the most general word I can think of to summarize Aristotle's message as I understand it is this: professional competence takes *caring.* Without caring, neither the research we do nor the conclusions we draw are likely to be excellent (virtuous). Competence in practical matters depends on a caring conduct of research and intervention. Perhaps this is why we currently witness not only a renaissance of the notion of *virtue ethics* but also a renewed interest in the idea of *virtue epistemology* (e.g., Sosa, 1980, 2007; Zagzebski, 1996, 1998; Fairweather and Zagzebski, 2001; DePaul and Zagzebski, 2003; Greco, 2004) An Aristotelian conception of competent practice (and of practical philosophy in general) might at heart consist in combining virtue ethics with virtue epistemology.

Some readers may object that even thus understood, the emphasis Aristotle places on *eudaimonia* is still highly idealistic for today's world, and that his specific list of virtues looks in any case outdated and all too dependent on the cultural setting of Ancient Greece. This is no doubt so. Yet I would suggest we may usefully understand the notion of *eudaimonia,* as well as the specific virtues discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* as Aristotle's attempt to work out the minimal normative content of practical reason. Practical reason, like any other concept of rationality, cannot do without some kind of inbuilt teleology; for all rationality is ultimately "rational" with a view to something beyond the effort of being rational itself. Insofar, we might say that any concept of rationality has not only a minimal normative content but also a minimally instrumental character; these two roots of rationality go hand in hand. Hence, lest we fall into the trap of merely instrumental reasoning that is unaware of its value implications, we better try to be clear about the indispensable normative content of all rationality that we may pursue in practice. Rationality in the sense of practical reason must never conceal this normative core. Rather, it should make us deal reasonably with it, for instance, by making it clear to ourselves and to everyone concerned what its practical consequences may be in a specific context of action, and by subjecting these consequences to everyone's critical judgment.

Another objection might be that Aristotle's approach is more one-sidedly individualistic and subjectivist than it should, given that it seeks to ground virtue in the psychology (intentions and dispositions) of the individual agent and, consequently, ends up focusing on the individual's judgment in terms of the mean relative to me/us. I have already pointed out that he always speaks of the "us" rather than the "me" as the reference point of the individual's judgment. To be fair to Aristotle, we also need to consider that practical philosophy to him (as he makes it clear from the outset in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) is a subdiscipline of political science (I.2, 1094a26). Political science is concerned with the study of what is good for the individual *and* for the community (cf. Aristotle, 1981); and since what is good for the *polis* is also good for the individual but is "a greater and more complete good" (Aristotle, 1985, I.2, 1094bb8), he considers political science as a basic discipline for studying ethics – ethical instruction should assign primacy to studying the *polis.* Counter to the impression one might initially gain from Aristotle's focus on individual virtue and happiness, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is in fact embedded in a vision of the good and just order of the *polis* and is thus not quite as individualistic in its perspective as it might appear at first glance.

The difficulty is, however, that this non-individualistic perspective does not translate *methodologically* into the doctrine of the mean. Kant was yet to come and to explain why practical reason (as he saw it) could not be grounded in motives related to the individual quest for happiness or *eudaimonia.* But then, Kant's alternative focus on the motive of "good will," along with *his* treatment of the role of happiness in ethics, may probably just as usefully be questioned from an Aristotelian perspective, quite apart from the fact that without Aristotle's pioneering work on so many aspects of philosophy, from logic to practical philosophy, the subsequent development of philosophy can hardly be imagined.

It is, then, probably not just Aristotle's insight into the fundamental role of virtue that matters, but also the development of practical philosophy that it has sparked. He was the first philosopher to explain the distinct character of practical as compared to theoretical and instrumental reasoning and hence, the need for a new philosophical discipline that would explore the nature and practice of practical reason. More than in later approaches to practical philosophies, the two aspects of reflection about the nature of practical reason and promoting its practice were still pursued by Aristotle in

conjunction. Thus, beyond his historical merit as the founder of practical philosophy, Aristotle's impetus today remains relevant in that it points to the need for *taking practical philosophy beyond philosophy*, into practice.

Perhaps it is appropriate, then, to conclude this discussion by explaining the way I read Aristotle in this respect. Remember his earlier-quoted account of the human good, according to which

> ... the human good turns out to be the soul's activity that expresses virtue. And if there are more virtues than one, the good will express the best and most complete virtue. Moreover, it will be in a complete life. For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy. (Aristotle, 1985, I.7, 1098a16-21)

This is Aristotle's core definition of the human good, before and beyond all enumeration of specific virtues. There are two aspects to this definition that merit attention. First, counter to what is often asserted, it is a timeless definition that is quite independent of the specific moral notions and the *zeitgeist* of his or any other epoch. Second, because it is so timeless and generic, Aristotle's practical philosophy might in fact have ended with this definition – if his only ambition had been to offer a philosophy *of* practice, as Plato had previously attempted it with his account of ethics as a matter of eternal and unchangeable ideas, pure forms of thought as it were. But the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not end here. Compared to Plato, Aristotle's conception of practical philosophy is radically different and innovative. The new core idea is that with its recognition of the good in a complete life of virtue, practical philosophy itself can only be complete when it realizes itself in human practice. Practical philosophy thus becomes a philosophical endeavor that is different indeed from all other philosophical thought: by its very nature its needs to burst the framework of theoretical and speculative thought and needs to venture into the field of actual practice – it must become practice itself.

As Aristotle explains, Plato's conception of the good "is not the sort of good a human being can pursue in action or possess; but that is just the sort [of good] we are looking for in our present inquiry." (I.7, 1096b34f) While Plato was trying to construct ethics from first ideas and principles, Aristotle is proceeding the other way round; he begins with common beliefs about what constitutes a happy and good life and from there tries to work towards the ideas and principles that may guide us in achieving such a life. In practical philosophy, then, we have to argue *towards* rather than *from* first

principles (I.4, 1095a28-b4) – a thought that over 2000 years later was to emerge once again in the work of the American pragmatists (esp. James, e.g., 1907, par. 21f). Practice is thus no longer only the subject-matter of practical philosophy but also becomes its end and its medium of completion. Practical philosophy emerges as an entirely new field of human thought, the idea of which is no longer to reason *about* practice but to render reason practical in a virtuous way, so that ultimately practice itself can be said to be reasonable. This is how I would sum up the core message of Aristotle's outline of a "philosophy of human affairs" (X.9, 1181b15), and it is certainly a message that remains as relevant and urgent today as ever before.

Affaire à suivre!

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January-February, 2009

The Aristotelian value basis of practical reason: happiness, virtue, and prudence

„It is hard work to be excellent."

(Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.9, 1109a24)

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