

## ***Key Concepts in Practical Philosophy***

### ***PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL WISDOM, AND MORAL VIRTUE***

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#### **i) Aristotle's Distinctions between Theoretical Wisdom, Practical Wisdom and Moral Virtue**

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, divides the intellectual virtues into the practical and theoretical on the basis of whether they are concerned with what can, or what cannot, be otherwise. Taking the second first, theoretical wisdom aims at truth, and is concerned with knowledge of first principles. This kind of theoretical knowledge, Aristotle believes, is of what is necessary and eternal. These are things that cannot be otherwise than they are. Much of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is concerned with discovering knowledge of things that don't change about how to live. To give a brief overview, these include that humans should seek *eudaimonia*, that moral virtue is a disposition to choose the mean, and that all emotions can be felt too little, too much, or in just the right amount.

Practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, is also aimed at truth, but truth in the service of action. It is concerned with what can be otherwise, with things that change. What changes might be thought to cover everything from the generation of peat bogs to the number of hairs on our heads (sadly always changing downwards both numerically and gravitationally). What Aristotle seems to be concerned with, in his analysis of practical wisdom, is things that change and are related to how humans live their lives among other humans. If we take a contemporary example, whether to drop the first atomic bomb or not, clearly there are questions of a technical nature about how to build the bomb and the nature of atomic decay. This is knowledge about things that change, but are not really what Aristotle has in mind when he talks about practical wisdom. Whilst an understanding of the technical feasibility of an atomic bomb is needed, the practically wise person would focus upon understanding the historical, political, military and human situation, determining what should be accomplished in this situation, and deciding what the best way of accomplishing these objectives is. Aristotle claims that only the person who is morally virtuous will be able to be practically wise, because only the morally virtuous person will perceive what really matters in the situation, and be motivated to carry out the appropriate action. Because practical wisdom is in the service of action, about things that change, and because human beings have to choose some actions rather than others, they need to be able to deliberate well about what actions are needed to bring about what is rightly desired; someone who is both morally virtuous and has practical wisdom will perceive and deliberate well, and hence, choose well.

Having introduced these three concepts of theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom and moral virtue let us see how, according to Aristotle, they relate to each other in terms of necessary conditions.

### **Theoretical wisdom (TW) and practical wisdom (PW)**

PW is not a necessary condition for TW; for example you can know what courage is in general but either not recognise that this is a situation that requires courage or know how to successfully seek the means to courage.

TW is not a necessary condition for PW as, if you are well brought-up, you will know what to do without knowledge of 'first-principles'.

### **Theoretical wisdom (TW) and moral virtue (MV)**

MV is not a necessary condition of TW; for example you can know what you should do but be weak-willed and fail to carry it out.

TW is not a necessary condition of MV; as with PW, you can have MV without an understanding of the 'first principles' on which MV is built.

### **Practical wisdom (PW) and moral virtue (MV)**

MV is a necessary condition of PW. You can be good at means-end reasoning without MV but you will neither perceive the situation you are in correctly nor desire the right end. Aristotle calls the person who can reason well to get an end that is not rightly desired clever but not wise. One awkward case is the weak-willed person, as the weak-willed person lacks MV but they do desire rightly. Given that they fail though to carry out what they rightly desire the weak-willed person must also lack PW. It doesn't seem that they should be called clever either but rather conflicted. The weak-willed person is very unlikely to be good at making long term plans as they will not have consistent desires.

PW is a necessary condition of MV, as part of being morally virtuous is (i) listening to what practical reason tells you about what a particular situation is like so that you can know what it is appropriate to feel and (ii) being able to carry out your good intentions through effective means-end reasoning.

### **ii) Aristotle's Gap Between Theoretical Wisdom and Living in Accordance with Practical Wisdom and Moral Virtue**

According to the above account the practically wise and morally virtuous person does not need theoretical wisdom. Aristotle's view is that both practical wisdom and moral virtue are acquired over a long period of training and instruction in a moral community. We acquire them by being shown what things matter in a situation, how to feel about these things, and how to act appropriately. This upbringing does not require theoretical knowledge; the purpose of moral education, Aristotle states, is not to find out what is good but to act well.

Aristotle does not however think that theoretical wisdom is totally irrelevant. Much of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is concerned with theoretical wisdom so we must ask why Aristotle wrote this work. Aristotle, like Plato in the *Republic*, has a very top-down view of ethical education. There are wise experts whose job it is to set the laws and to arrange and carry out the training of the young. In order for them to do this as well as possible they need an understanding of what they are aiming at. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is written for these legislators to understand what the target is. Aristotle is writing for an audience

that has already acquired practical wisdom and moral virtue, to enable them to develop a greater theoretical understanding of what they already know.

Aristotle's view of the long-term nature of the acquisition of practical wisdom and moral virtue, and the irrelevance of theoretical wisdom for most people, suggests that little can be achieved by a practical philosopher, who will engage with a client for only a limited time, in enabling the client to become either practically wise or morally virtuous. Such a conclusion though seems premature. There are two lines of criticism that can be levelled at this argument. First by denying that theoretical wisdom has so little role to play in being practically wise, and second by denying that practical wisdom and moral virtue can only be acquired through a long period of training.

It is a weakness of Aristotle's account that the values that are taken on trust from aristocratic Athenian society are not held up for a thoroughgoing analysis; Aristotle, for instance, fails to fully criticise the Athenian treatment of women or slaves. In Aristotle's 'top-down' view of moral training what counted as an excellent character was rather unconditionally accepted from the aristocratic Athenian society Aristotle adopted; in the list of Aristotelian excellences critical free-thinking and its needed correlate, free dialogue, do not feature. Aristotle's 'traditionalism' is both a cause and an effect of failing to value free-thinking or free dialogue as virtues.

Second, even if values which Aristotelian citizens are trained in should be accepted, if they are not understood at a theoretical level then citizens will not know how to apply them to new situations which they haven't been trained for, nor how to deal with situations in which different, and perhaps conflicting, values call to be satisfied. Aristotelian citizens may be able to deal with straightforward, common cases (as long as they have been trained in the right values) but dealing with difficult moral situations will be beyond them. In these cases both theoretical wisdom, to understand what matters, and practical wisdom, to determine how best to satisfy what matters, are needed. (see Hare, 1981).

In Aristotle's account of development there is no role given to phenomenological analysis, or to conceptual investigation, or to critical thinking, and hence no mention of the transformations in theoretical and practical wisdom, and moral excellence, that better understanding ourselves, our beliefs and the world around us can bring. For instance explicitly asking what values we have implicitly lived our lives by, and holding these up for investigation, can produce profound changes in our understanding of the kind of person we are, what we think of the kind of person we are, and how we live our lives.

### **iii) The Role of Practical Philosophy in the Generation of Theoretical and Practical Wisdom**

Above we have been arguing that Aristotle fails to appreciate fully the interrelationships between theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom and moral virtue. How does practical philosophy deal with these interrelationships ?

A central feature of Socratic Dialogue, Philosophy for Children and philosophical counselling is connecting the concrete and the abstract. In all of them there is a move from the concrete to the abstract and back to the concrete. Socratic Dialogue begins with practical wisdom as participants begin by offering a concrete example of a concept (for

instance that something is a case of tolerance). Through regressive abstraction theoretical wisdom is uncovered as participants come to see what is assumed about toleration in the example, and to judge whether the example is really a case of toleration. Once this theoretical wisdom has been uncovered then it can be used as practical wisdom. The deepening and testing of the concept of toleration through looking in detail at an example allows for a fuller theoretical understanding of the concept; and the investigation of the example through its conceptual analysis allows a deeper understanding of the practical experience. Theoretical and practical wisdom feed into each other, deepening and strengthening each other.

In Philosophy with Children there is a similar emphasis on linking practical experience with theoretical understanding. In this case the material investigated is not supplied by one of the participants but is instead in the form of a story; as in Socratic Dialogue this story is investigated to see what concepts illustrate the behaviour of the characters and these concepts are explored. In philosophical counselling the focus is on analysing the concrete lived experience and within the counselling process the client might arrive at some theoretical knowledge about, for instance, the nature of passion or love.

All three of these methods can also be seen as providing an education in certain intellectual and moral virtues. In dialoguing with others we test what we think and feel against the understanding of others, and to do this successfully we need to use and develop virtues such as patience, courage and trust. Furthermore it is likely that these forms of dialogue might go some way to reducing the problem of weakness of will. Values which are publicly declared are more likely to be lived up to and, if Socrates is right, our desire for them will be increased by a true appreciation of what they really are.

### References

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### Glossary

**Practical Wisdom:** Knowing the right thing to do in a particular circumstance through understanding the circumstance rightly, knowing what matters, and effective means-end reasoning to bring about what matters.

**Theoretical Wisdom:** Knowledge of things that don't change. In ethics this is about what is really right and wrong, what is living well and living badly.

**Moral Virtue:** A state of character in which we are disposed to feel things in accordance with the mean.

**Mean:** To feel things in accordance with the mean is to feel them in the right way, to the right person, at the right time, for the right reason.

**Eudaimonia:** Happiness, or flourishing, or living well.

**Weak-Willed:** A person is weak-willed if they don't do what they think they should do.