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Aristotle on Reason, Practical Reason, and Living Well
D. K.W. Modrak

From the beginning the *Nicomachean Ethics* is about practical thinking, how we choose or should choose to act and to urge others to act. Any form of thought that requires the conceptualization of one or more actions is a type of practical thinking. Thus the deliberations of a legislator, the scheming of a huckster and the choices of a good woman are all instances of practical reason. In view of its importance, it is especially disturbing that Aristotle's account of practical thinking is open to the charge of inadequacy on two major fronts: (1) the cogency of his analysis of moral weakness; and (2) the absence of a genuine conceptual niche for *phronesis*, whose work seems to be done by *ethike arete*, by *euboulia* and by *sophia*.

I

Since Aristotle's treatment of *akrasia* sheds considerable light on his conception of practical thinking, I propose to begin with it. Socrates left his successors with a dilemma: either give up the project of a rationalistic ethics or deny the existence of moral weakness. Indeed the failure to act according to one's best judgment about which action to perform seems peculiarly irrational and presumably would have been dismissed long ago as a form of madness had it not been quite widespread among rational animals. This fact causes Aristotle to reject Socrates' view that *akrasia* is impossible, even though he agrees with Socrates that right reason issues in right actions. Aristotle's strategy is to establish the possibility of *akrasia* while at the same time retaining the kernal of truth in Socrates' argument—namely that knowledge of the universal is not dragged around by passion. According to Aristotle, *akrasia* involves a perceptual failure: the akratic agent fails to apply a general principle s/he accepts to the particular circumstances that provide the context for the action. The akratic agent resembles the geometry student who knows that the sum of the angles of a triangle are 180° but fails to realize that a given figure is a triangle and hence is ignorant of the sum of its angles, or the person who knows that mules are sterile and yet nevertheless has the momentary impression that a particular mule is pregnant (67a35-39).

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1 I have not been able "in the short time allowed by the clock" to mention the many articles and books that have influenced my thinking about the topics discussed here. Below I cite other authors only when their work is explicitly mentioned.

2 I use "action" both for a plan of action existing as the object of an agent's thought and for an observable performance in the physical world.
Reviewed from the perspective of Aristotle's account of the relation between thought and perception, this line of analysis becomes more plausible. Apprehending a sensible particular as an instance of a universal is a constant feature of thinking. This feature is at the heart of Aristotle's claim that even the most abstract forms of reasoning are not possible without imagery (phantasmata). In such cases the image presents a sensible particular that the thinker uses as an arbitrary example of the universal, the proper object of the thought. In the case of perceptual judgment and practical reasoning, the apprehension of the sensible particular is at the center of the cognitive experience, and the particular is no longer treated indifferently as an arbitrary example but becomes instead the specific object of the judgment. Here the point of subsuming the particular under a given universal is not to enable the thinker to contemplate the universal but rather to enable her or him to categorize the particular. Classifying concrete objects provides the information needed for manipulating these objects in action and for understanding the world in which we live. Since every concrete particular exemplifies a number of different universals, each standing in numerous relations to other universals, the failure to apprehend the particular as an instance of a specific universal is easily explained (cf. 67a26-30; 1142a20-22; 1147a5-7). Moreover, the complexity of the relations among universals also leaves room for further confusions, e.g., for perceiving that C, a honey dessert, is yellow and hence misperceiving C's flavor (cf. 425b4-5).

Just as a perceiver may fail to bring her/his general knowledge to bear on a particular case, the akrates may fail to respond in accordance with his/her moral principles. The akratic agent fails to recognize that his/her present situation falls under the appropriate universal and acts instead on the basis of another applicable universal (1147a24-b3). Aristotle supposes that the akrates with a sweet tooth holds two true beliefs, namely, "sweets should be avoided," and "sweets are pleasant to eat." He spies a dessert, concludes, "this is pleasant to eat," and promptly eats the dessert. Only later does he realize that the other principle also held in this instance. Because practical reasoning ultimately terminates in a judgment about what is to be done, its object is a particular embedded in a context supplied by the agent's character and intellect. In the case described the context consists in pleasant associations rather than moral principles. Since this context affirms the pleasurableness of the object, phantasia as the vehicle for pleasurable sensations is the operative faculty instead of reason (433a10; 1150b28). By assimilating akrasia to a more general type of cognitive failure—the failure

3 427b16, 431a15, 432a8, 449b31, 1378b9.
to recognize a particular as an instantiation of a specific universal, Aristotle preserves the intelligibility of akratic behavior.

Unfortunately, Aristotle's explanation of akrasia seems at odds with his treatment of moral principles. Principles of conduct are not merely entertained; they are ingrained in one's character as a result of having performed the right actions with the right attitudes in the past. To know in this instance is to interpret one's situation in accordance with the principle. To meet this objection, Aristotle emphasizes the tenuous quality of the akratic agent's knowledge of the principle; just as a drunkard can quote philosophy without understanding or a student parrot his/her teacher, the akrates espouses the principle. Now the explanation is threatened from another quarter: in what sense can the akrates be said to have knowledge at all? To the extent that Aristotle has an answer, it must turn on the difference between accepting a principle as true and having made it a part of oneself (cf. 1147a10-24). The more deeply a principle is ingrained in one's character, the less likely one is to fail to recognize its applications.

On my reading of N. E. VII.3, the akrates does not apply the appropriate universal to a specific object. Charles takes the opposite tack. He believes that Aristotle allows the akratic agent to draw the conclusion that doing x is best. This conclusion is then ignored in favor of the conclusion that y is good. The akratic agent (Charles says) fails to appropriately accept the first conclusion due to his not bringing his motivational judgments in line with his valuational ones. There is little doubt that Aristotle's analysis turns in part on a gap between value judgments and motivation, for Aristotle claims that the akrates unlike the akolastos preserves the arche, the moral principle that should issue in the right action (1151a11-19). There are, however, two serious drawbacks to Charles' development of this insight. First VII. 3 offers scant support for it. Later at 1151a1-3, a type of akrates who deliberates is mentioned but nowhere does Aristotle suggest that this deliberation issues in a decision to act. The explanation given in N.E. VII.3 denies that the akrates draws but ignores the right conclusion nor does the De Motu An's account of action leave room for such behavior.
principles is such that a total split between valuational and motivational factors is not a possibility. What happens in the case of akrasia is a partial split occasioned by the akratic agent's tenuous hold on the principle and the subsumption of his/her particular circumstances under a competing desirability criterion.

But you might object: Aristotle says that the akrates when he is in a state of passion either does not have the last premiss (teleutaia protasis) or has it in the sense in which a drunken man may utter the verses of Empedocles (1147b9-12). If “teleutaia protasis” refers to the conclusion of the correct syllogism, then isn’t this evidence that the akrates reaches two conclusions instead of one? It is not. Aristotle typically uses protasis for premiss rather than conclusion and this usage would cohere better with the rest of VII.3. Unfortunately, identifying the teleutaia protasis with the minor premiss does not solve all our problems. In the sweet food example, the akrates seems to have the appropriate minor premiss, namely, this food is sweet, which seems to figure in both the realized syllogism and the correct alternative. Nevertheless, Aristotle might believe that in most real life cases of practical reasoning, different middle terms are operative. For instance, the same food is dry and bitter. Were the akrates thinking clearly he would perceive the food’s dryness, subsume it under the appropriate universal and eat it, as it is, he responds to the premiss, “this is bitter,” and avoids the food.

Aristotle’s detailed explanation of akrasia in VII.3 is tailored to fit the impetuous akrates who confused by sensual desire fails to put 2 and 2 together. Subsequently Aristotle mentions a type of akrates who deliberates (1151a1-3, 1152a27-28), but presumably s/he reaches only an intermediate conclusion, since here too the difference between akrasia (of all types) and vice is drawn on the grounds that the akrates acts against choice (para prohairesin) (1151a8). The akrates might decide, for instance, that a type of grain should be eaten because it is a dry food, but fail to make the judgments necessary to implement this decision (cf. 1147a5-7). Aristotle hypothesizes that the failure to perceive one’s current situation in accordance with one’s internalized values must ultimately be explained by appeal to a physiological state that causes one to lose the proper perspective. Just as in illness, we misperceive our circumstances, believing for instance that a crack on the wall is a dangerous animal, in states of sensual arousal or anger, we misperceive our circumstances (460b3-11). If we are akrateis, we are prone to such misperceptions. Since perception is a psychophysical state, disturbances in the body occasion perceptual mistakes (cf.460b11-16); hence akrasia is partially due to a bodily state (1147b6-9, cf.1151a5-6). Here again Aristotle extends his analysis of perceptual error in general to akrasia.
Despite its physiological component, akrasia is blameworthy. The blameworthiness of an act, for Aristotle, is not decided solely by reference to its circumstances; the relevant question is whether the agent might have had a different character and hence might have acted correctly (cf. 1114a4-7). The akratic agent through self-discipline might well have acquired the ability to withstand his/her sensual desires, such that when confronted with a sweet food, for instance, s/he did not become disoriented and fail to recognize which universal to subsume the food under. It is this failure for which the akrates is blamed not for succumbing to a temptation that given his character was in fact irresistible (cf. 1114a3-23).

II

The relation between the agent's immediate circumstances and the universals applied to those circumstances provided the key to understanding Aristotle's solution to the problem of akrasia. The same relation is central to his account of phronesis.

Now all the states [of practical thought] converge, as might be expected, to the same point; for when we speak of judgement (gnome) and understanding (sunesis) and practical wisdom (phronesis) and reason (nous) we credit the same people with possessing judgement and reason and with having practical wisdom and understanding. For all these faculties deal with ultimates (ton eschaton), i.e., with particulars (ton kath' hekaston). (1143a25-28)

Phronesis is the paradigm for practical thinking; it includes all of the laudatory aspects of the other forms, and it enables its possessor to live virtuously. Phronesis is "an eye of the soul" that enables a virtuous person to "see" what should be done in a particular case (1144a30; cf. 1114b6-8, 1143b13). Just as a perceiver may have to take various steps to achieve a clear perception of a selected object (for instance, move closer to the object, remove objects obstructing the view, etc.), the phronimos may have to consider various strategies initially. Nonetheless, the recognition of the right strategy has the same immediacy as an act of sense perception.8 The "seeing" of the phronimos is a more complex operation than seeing a color, and thus at 1142a26-29 Aristotle compares it to the perception of a common sensible--an object such as shape perceived through the joint activity of several sense modalities. When we perceive a particular triangular shape through the common sense, we apprehend that figure as an instantiation of

the universal, triangularity, while phronesis determines the right rule embodied in the morally correct action. Through phronesis, the agent apprehends the end as manifested in particular actions. Similarly when a phronimos recognizes that a particular performance is an act of courage, s/he apprehends the act as an instantiation of a universal principle prescribing courageous behavior.

Aristotle's grounds for assimilating practical thinking to a kind of moral perception are several. Elsewhere he uses the distinction between particular and universal to differentiate between perceptual and noetic activity, and thus he associates practical thinking with a kind of perception. In addition, all thinking is closely connected with perception. Thinking depends upon imagery. Even the most abstract objects are thought in images (phantasmata) that function as sensuous contents (aisthemata) for noetic activity (431a15, 432a9). Thus a certain type of perceptual activity, namely phantasia, serves as the substratum for thinking in general. Practical thinking is even more closely related to perceptual activity because it is directed upon concrete particulars that are the objects of perception. In the *De Anima* Aristotle extends the explanatory model for perception to thinking. On this model the cognitive object determines the character of the cognitive activity. In the case of practical thinking, the object as represented determines the character of the thought and the corresponding action. The representation of a dessert as sweet and delightful determines the character of the akrates' cognition and behavior; the representation of the same dessert as sweet and harmful determines the character of the sophron's thought and action.

The perceptual character of phronesis causes Aristotle to compare phronesis to theoretical nous which apprehends the ultimate principles (primitive propositions) of a science. Both faculties are concerned with the expression of the universal in the particular; nous arrives at its objects through the apprehension of particular cases (88a4-8; 100a14-b15; 1143a35-b6), and phronesis apprehends its objects as instantiations of universals. They differ in that the objects of nous provide the upper limit in terms of generality whereas the objects of phronesis are ultimate particulars, specific actions to be performed in unique situations.

9 An action manifests or exemplifies a principle of conduct if it accords with that principle.
10 To use Irwin's translation of kata ton orthon logon (*Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics*): the morally correct action "expresses the right rule."
11 *De An.* III.4, 6-8. See also Modrak, chapter five.
The account of phronesis seems fairly straightforward until we begin to consider phronesis in relation to moral virtue and the lesser intellectual virtue, euboulia. To make a niche for phronesis in relation to the former, Aristotle stresses first the role of phronesis in determining the standard by which means are chosen and second the role of phronesis in choosing the means to ends fixed by moral virtue. This is already problematic, and the difficulty is compounded when he defines euboulia as correctness in deliberation about means to an end apprehended by phronesis. Is there an interpretative strategy that would allow Aristotle to maintain all three positions without inconsistency?

Phronesis is necessary for moral virtue, and virtue is necessary for phronesis (N. E VI.12). Some of Aristotle's remarks suggest a quite uncomplicated connection—virtue provides the end to be achieved by an action and phronesis apprehends the means to that end (1144a6-9). The virtuous person seeks in his or her actions to achieve a mean between extremes of passion. Since passions do not respond immediately to argument, virtue is acquired through a process of conditioning. If we consistently avoid over-eating, we come in time to desire only appropriate amounts of food. This desire is constitutive of temperance. During the early developmental stage, the foundation for virtue can be acquired through training provided by persons possessing phronesis, but mature virtue involves the autonomous choice of right actions. Deciding what and how much to eat on any given occasion requires moral insight as well as the general desire to be temperate. On the other hand, the ability to recognize through phronesis which amount is appropriate needs the context determined by the desire to be temperate. "This is why we call sophrosune by this name; we imply that it preserves (sozousan) one's phronesis." 1140b11-12.

This tidy picture becomes more complicated when we look at other parts of the story. By definition, moral virtue is a disposition to choose the mean relative to oneself determined by the principle (logos) which the phronimos would use (1107a1). Virtue is a hexis that issues in right actions performed at the right time in the right way. These actions are chosen for their own sake; they embody a mean between extremes of appetites or passions; they are the same in character as the actions that an agent must perform to acquire moral virtue. In the choice of a virtuous action, both deliberation and desire play a role; the agent acts in accordance with both his/her values and wants. What then is the logos determined by phronesis? The easiest answer is: the standard which defines the virtue in question. The objective standard in the case of courage—the mean between cowardice and rashness—is the recognition that under certain circumstances one ought
to be willing to die for one's city-state (1115a25-35). The drawback to this answer is that a person might behave rashly who possessed this logos. Such a person would construe "appropriate circumstances" too broadly. The gap between general principles and particular circumstances motivates Aristotle to posit a distinctly practical form of reason (1141b14-21). Perhaps, then, the logos just is the mean between extremes in this context. If so, the definition becomes redundant--"to choose the mean as determined by the mean..." A compromise between the two seems to be the best answer: the logos is the application of the correct general principle to the particular circumstances. The standard for the courageous act on the battlefield is not the completely general and hence qualified standard, but rather the prescriptive principle, one ought to risk one's life for one's city-state.12

In comparing phronesis to euboulia, Aristotle associates phronesis with the end, and similar considerations seem to motivate the claim that the akrates might be clever but not practically wise. Euboulia is the ability to deliberate well about the proper means to a good end. To reflect on the means to an end, one must in some sense consider the end. The difference between phronesis and euboulia must turn on the difference between apprehending an end and subsuming it under some broader objective. One might, for example, exhibit euboulia in determining how best to hold one's battle position but phronesis in deciding to do this in order to behave courageously. The akrates by contrast fails to subsume his immediate ends under the appropriate moral principle. Hence the akrates lacks phronesis. He might, nevertheless, be quite good at selecting effective means to his immediate ends.

At this point, Aristotle seems to have two lines on phronesis. One establishes that phronesis is the source of the moral prescriptions that are exhibited in the virtuous person's actions (1143a8-10). The other identifies phronesis with the ability to recognize which actions will satisfy the virtuous person's ends. Although each position is coherent and provides the basis for distinguishing between phronesis and the other moral and intellectual virtues, the fit between the two remains problematic. If Aristotle has an answer, it must turn on construing the notions of end and means in a way that allows both phronesis and virtue to be involved in the determination of both the end and the chosen means. In the case of ends, this is relatively easy. Reason unaided by desire cannot bring about action (433a23-30); unless the agent wants to be courageous or has some other goal requiring

12 Cf. Aristotle's formulation of the major premisses of practical syllogisms in N.E VII.3 and De Motu An. 7.
courageous action, s/he will not behave courageously. Wants can be informed by reason but they are at the core non-rational and respond to conditioning rather than argument. Courage is the state that results from conditioning the emotional capacity for fear. Together virtue and phronesis fix the end; the former by providing the emotional basis for adopting an end, and the latter by conceptualizing it. The first premiss of a practical syllogism expresses the content of the intellectual component of a practical principle while the motivational component determines its mode of apprehension.13 Included among the akratic agent's beliefs is the moral principle that should issue in the right action. But the principle is not put into play because the appetitive/emotional state of the agent is inhospitable to its application. In contrast, the sophron's character insures that his desires will not obscure his principles.

III

In N. E. VI.12, Aristotle ponders, what good will wisdom (sophia) do us if phronesis is sufficient for eudaimonia and conversely if wisdom is sufficient of what use will phronesis be? In Book X, he compounds the problem by suggesting that sophia is sufficient. This prompts the question: can we by appealing to Aristotle's conception of thinking find support for an inclusive conception of the final good where both sophia and phronesis have a role to play? There are striking similarities between the operation of theoretical nous and practical nous. In both cases, sensuous contents of particulars are manipulated by the thinker in a way that yields a universal instantiated by the particular. The direction of the thought is different insofar as the particulars serve solely as the means to the universal in theoretical thinking but remain at the center of the cognition in practical thinking. Moreover, the ability to move from particular cases to universals is essential to both types of thinking. All objects of knowledge are derived from particulars,14 and phronesis as exercised by the legislator is the apprehension of general principles. Since thinking about more difficult objects enables one to think even more clearly about other objects (429b3-4), the person possessing sophia will be especially well-equipped to think

13 See Modrak, "Aisthesis..."
14 Pst. An. I.18, II.19; Met. I.1; De An. III.8.
about practical questions. Yet at best this only shows that the possession of sophia will benefit the phronimos not the converse.

A more promising approach is to look at the De Animâ account of the psyche, since the joint activity of the perceptual, appetitive and noetic faculties envisaged there provides the theoretical foundation for an inclusive conception of human excellence. This conception is prominent in the analysis of action. "These two then appear to be the sources of movement, appetite and mind (nous), if one supposes that imagination is a kind of thought (voesin)" (433a10-11). Every voluntary movement of an animal of any sort has a cognitive component, the presentation through sense or intellect of a putative object of desire, and a motivational component the active desire to pursue or avoid the object presented. The convergence of cognitive and motivational objects is typically in the case of humans the convergence of rational and appetitive faculties. This is why Aristotle includes both in the description of virtue. Moreover, since action based on deliberation is typical of human beings, the intellectual virtues will be as necessary for right action as the moral ones. Even though the employment of practical nous will be far more important than that of theoretical nous, Aristotle in view of the similarities among noetic activities, quite naturally assumes that people who exhibit one type of nous are likely to possess the other as well (1143a25-28).

Rationality distinguishes human life from other forms of animal life; yet rationality is dependent upon the perceptual faculty for its objects. "Since seemingly nothing exists separate from sensible magnitudes, the objects of thought (noeta) are in the sensible forms, both abstract objects and the states and affections of sensible things." (432a4-6) In addition, a perceptual power, imagination, is the source of the images that serve as the material substrata for thought. Because it is dependent upon the perceptual faculty, the rational faculty is indirectly dependent upon the body; however, the perceptual faculty is exercised through bodily organs and hence is dependent in a quite straightforward way on the nutritive faculty. Thus the exercise of a human mind differs in important particulars from the

15 Granted, in practical contexts Aristotle sometimes compares the person who has theory but no practical experience unfavorably to the person having experience but lacking theoretical knowledge (1141b17-21). However, the knowledge in question is quite specialized and limited. Sophia is the highest virtue precisely because it is the most comprehensive form of knowledge; hence it is unlikely that Aristotle would believe that a person lacking in years and experience could possess sophia.

16 De An. III.9-11; De Motu An. 6-7.
life of a disembodied mind. Consequently, the fit between the psychology and an account of human flourishing that identified human excellence with the superior function of the most abstract form of reasoning could scarcely be worst.

Nevertheless, we seem to find a peculiarly intellectualist conception of human life at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Consider, for example, (a) the identification of the person with the power of thought (*to diavoetikon; to vooun*) in *NE* IX.4 and X.717 or (b) the identification of the highest virtue with contemplation in *NE* X.7-8. With respect to (a) it is worth noting that the person is identified not with the capacity for contemplation per se but rather with the faculty for thought. The activities of the latter include practical thinking as well contemplation, and excellence in the exercise of this faculty will consist in all forms of intellectual virtue.\(^{18}\) Since *phronesis* requires moral virtue, an inclusive conception of *eudaimonia* would seem to follow from the identification of the person with his/her rational faculty. In addition, in *NE* IX.9, human life is described as essentially the activity of perceiving or thinking, and the reflective awareness of self is the consciousness of these activities. This represents a further broadening of the conception of the distinctly human core capacities to include all forms of cognition.

By contrast the conception of *eudaimonia* in *NE* X.7-8 seems to be irredeemably intellectualist. Even though Aristotle calls the virtue of the composite human being "human virtue" and contemplation "god-like," he nevertheless urges us to strain every muscle to live as much like gods as possible. *Eudaimonia* realized through contemplation is perfect and separate.\(^{19}\) Certain features of Aristotle's account mitigate against a radical separation of contemplation from other forms of virtue. The life of contemplation requires the necessities of life (1177a30) and to this extent would require at least some of the moral virtues. While it is possible to exercise *sophia* alone, living among other scholars facilitates its use (1177b1). Living in a community with others requires *phronesis* and the moral virtues. Finally, unlike the gods we are not able to engage in contemplation continuously; hence at times even the wisest among us can only achieve secondary *eudaimonia*, "the life expressing the other virtue", namely, moral virtue, for which *phronesis* is needed. In short, there is an

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\(^{17}\) 1116a18, 23; cf. 1178a2-7.

\(^{18}\) Even in X.8, the contrast is drawn between the life of reason and the life of moral virtue not between two types of intellectual virtue (*sophia* and *phronesis*).\(^{1178a8-b8}\).

\(^{19}\) 1178a23: *kechorismene*; 1177a18: *teleia*. 
inclusive conception of human excellence at work here too, but it is one that
countenances a hierarchical ordering of faculties and virtues. Thinking in its
most excellent form will not be practical.

It is widely believed that the presence of an intellectualist strain in
Aristotle's ethics undermines the project of identifying human excellence
with the life of the phronimos. Up to a point, it does. However, the
theoretical requirements of the life of phronesis and the practical
requirements of the life of contemplation have the consequence that the life
of an actual eudaimon, philosopher or statesman, would be a mixed life.