

## Right Reason and Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

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This paper will analyze Aristotle's doctrine of the mean as part of his more comprehensive account of moral virtue and practical reason in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The paper connects with the theme of this volume by delineating the different roles of perception and comprehension (*nous*) in establishing the invariable starting points of theoretical wisdom and the variable starting points of practical wisdom.

We start with Aristotle's definition of virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6:

Virtue (*aretē*), then, is a state (*hexis*) concerned with choice (*prohairesis*), being in the mean (*mesotēti*) relative to us (*pros hēmas*), determined by reason (*logōi*), and as the man of practical wisdom (*ho phronimos*) would determine it.<sup>1</sup> It is a mean between two vices, one of excess, and one of deficiency—and a mean for this reason: whereas one group of vices falls short and the other exceeds what is required both in emotions and actions, virtue finds and selects the intermediate (*to meson*). (1106<sup>b</sup>36-1107<sup>a</sup>6)

I aim to make sense of Aristotle's definition by investigating its components and how they fit together. I shall argue, first, that the mean-state—virtue—differs from the opposing vices of excess and deficiency in its flexible response to variable situations. A particular situation perceived by the practical agent stimulates the agent to aim for a goal—called in *E.N.* VI the “target” (*skopos*)—for instance, to cure a particular sick

person or to act courageously in an emergency. According to Aristotle, the agent deliberates about the best means to attain the goal and chooses an action or series of actions to achieve it, and much of his discussion concerns the operation of right reason in deliberation. But I shall argue, second, that before effective deliberation can start, the practical agent exercises right reason about the goal (*logos ho heneka tinos*) (VI.2, 1139<sup>a</sup>31-33) to delimit it by building into its specification the relevant circumstances of the situation calling for action. While many scholars have discussed the role of deliberation in Aristotle's practical philosophy,<sup>2</sup> the role of perception and right reason in delimiting goals has received less attention.<sup>3</sup> This paper aims to fill that lacuna.

## 1. Virtue as a State of the Soul

At the end of Book I and beginning of Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes two parts of the human soul, the rational part (*logos*) responsible for directing behavior, and the appetitive or desiderative part capable of sharing somehow in reason and obedient to its dictates.<sup>4</sup> He sets aside a third psychic part, the vegetative, because it does not share in reason and so is not involved in human virtue. The virtues of the rational part of the soul include theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), both acquired through learning, whereas the virtues of character, such as courage (*andreia*) and temperance (*sōphrosunē*) associated with the desiderative part of the soul come about through habituation—that is to say, through repeated practice dealing with situations calling for courageous or temperate action. Becoming morally virtuous requires practice and drill in much the same way as becoming a proficient flute player does.

In *E.N.* II.5 Aristotle identifies the virtues as states (*hexeis*) of the soul, marked off from two other genera of psychic phenomena—affections (*pathē*), including emotions, and capacities (*dunameis*). People incur praise and blame for their virtues and vices, but the emotions, such as anger, fear, confidence, pity, and envy, and in general pleasure and pain, are mere reactions to what befalls them and not a matter of choice. What is a matter of choice, and so worthy of praise or blame, is our disposition to respond appropriately to situations that arouse our emotions (1106<sup>b</sup>18-23). The virtues and vices differ from ordinary capacities in that we gain them through learning or habituation, whereas capacities, such as sight and tendencies to feel the emotions, come about naturally in the soul. Virtues and vices are capacities, too, manifested in activities, but they are acquired states (*hexeis*) of the soul which dispose us well or poorly toward the emotions and other things that happen to us. For instance, we are poorly disposed toward anger if we feel it too violently or too mildly, but well-disposed if we feel it to an intermediate degree (*meseōs*) (1105<sup>b</sup>25-28). Aristotle does not think that a person well-disposed toward anger always responds moderately (in a middling way) but rather that one's response should match the degree of provocation.<sup>5</sup>

The word *aretē* extends beyond the virtues of character and intellect, since it means “excellence” broadly and applies to anything that is a good instance of its kind and performs its function well. For instance, the excellence of an eye is sharp sight, a state equipping the eye to see well; and the excellence of a horse is the collection of features that make a horse a good specimen of its kind, suited to run quickly, to carry its rider properly, and to stand firm in the face of an enemy attack (*E.N.* II.6, 1106<sup>a</sup>14-21). Aristotle seeks the special excellence of human beings, and in this context “virtue” is a

good translation of *aretē*, since it is a state of the human soul that makes a person a good specimen of humankind, able to perform the human function well, a function roughly defined in *E.N.* I.7 as “the activity (*energeia*) of soul in accordance with reason (*kata logon*) or not without reason (*mē aneu logou*)” (1098<sup>a</sup>7-8), a function we perform well if our actions accord with virtue (1098<sup>a</sup>8-18). To fill out this schematic account Aristotle needs to identify the distinguishing features of human virtue, the state of the soul enabling a person to live a good and flourishing human life.

## 2. The Mean Relative to Us

According to the definition of virtue in *E.N.* II.6 quoted at the start of this paper, virtue is the mean-state (*mesotēs*) relative to us (*pros hēmas*), a state defined earlier in the same chapter. Aristotle locates virtue in an intermediate position on a scale between two vices and says that, in the case of anything admitting a spectrum and divisible, one can take more or less or an equal amount—the equal being an intermediate (*meson*) between excess and defect. One can take that amount determined either by the thing itself (*kat’ auto to pragma*) or relative to us (*pros hēmas*) (1106<sup>a</sup>24-29). Six is the intermediate between two and ten, to judge by the thing itself, and that intermediate is always the same, exceeding one extreme and falling short of the other by an equal amount regardless of the particular context, such as the sort of things being counted.

Aristotle illustrates the mean relative to us by citing a physical trainer determining the right amount of food for a novice and for Milo the seasoned wrestler. Here the trainer must take into account differences in the size, weight, and strength of the two athletes, and the right amount for Milo will be too much for the beginner (1106<sup>a</sup>29-<sup>b</sup>7). Some

scholars have misunderstood the mean relative to us, taking the intermediate to be relative to the individual agent (Milo or the novice), but Lesley Brown has convincingly argued that the example concerns the trainer seeking the right amount for each athlete in light of differences in them and their circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Brown contends that “relative to us” should be explained not as “relative to individuals” (and *a fortiori* not as “relative to individual agents”) but as “relative to us as human beings.”<sup>7</sup> Even this construal remains somewhat misleading, because it suggests relativity to human agents (as opposed, say, to other animals or gods), whereas the idea expressed in the example about the trainer, the novice, and Milo, is the relativity of the circumstances in which we humans (in this case Milo and the novice) are situated as beneficiaries, relativity the virtuous agent (the trainer) must build into his account of the goal in preparation for determining the intermediate action.

The intermediate action relative to us differs from case to case, depending on many variable factors, but should be one and the same for any expert who considers the relevant context in a particular case. Two experts reflecting on the same collection of factors should make the same assessment of the right amount of food for each athlete—say six pounds for Milo at his current weight and strength, two pounds for the beginner. Through practice in making such assessments and adjusting his action on the basis of them, an expert (in this case the trainer) acquires a firm and enduring state of the soul—the mean-state relative to us—permitting him to trust his judgment in evaluating shifting conditions and to act on its prescriptions on future occasions.

Aristotle uses the word *mesotēs* (“mean-state”) fairly consistently for the lasting state of the soul and the word *meson* (“intermediate”) for the intermediate action to be

performed on particular occasions.<sup>8</sup> The example of the expert trainer suggests that while some definite but different amount of food is right for different athletes at different stages of their careers (and hence the intermediate varies from case to case depending on variable factors), the trainer's own state, which equips him to make the right decisions in different circumstances is firm yet versatile in its response. Whereas inexperienced trainers make mistakes by giving the amount proper to Milo in his prime to the novice as well (thus giving an excess to the novice), or vice versa (thus giving too little to Milo), or prescribe some middling amount wrong for both—this would be inappropriate moderation—the expert judges each case individually and gives the amount “equal” to and therefore right for the particular situation. This observation suggests that someone in the erroneous state of excess or deficiency goes wrong in action either because he ignores the variable conditions, and so displays rigidity in his response to different situations, or, though taking variables into account, still responds in the same way.<sup>9</sup> The irascible man always reacts too vehemently whatever the degree of provocation, and the mild man always responds too mildly however great the injury.<sup>10</sup> The person in the mean-state differs from his excessive and deficient cousins in always seeking the intermediate, and his attentiveness to salient details demands adaptability, the capacity to adjust his response depending on differences in the situation, and so to display the right degree of vehemence or mildness as the situation warrants.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Deliberation and Choice

One feature distinguishing virtue from other states of the soul is choice (*prohairesis*), a topic Aristotle explores in Book III in connection with voluntary action

and deliberation. Voluntary actions are those whose source of motion is internal to the agent and up to the person to do or not to do, as opposed to involuntary actions whose moving principle is outside the agent and so take place under compulsion. Choice is voluntary, though voluntariness extends more broadly than choice, since children and animals act voluntarily but do not choose, and some of our acts occur suddenly without choice. Choice, says Aristotle, is deliberative desire for things we have in our power to get or achieve (III.3, 1113<sup>a</sup>10-11); choice constitutes the final step of deliberation and prescribes a particular action to promote some desired goal.

Deliberation itself is a process of working out the means to bring about some desirable end, where the goal is achievable through our own efforts. We do not deliberate about ends but about means (1112<sup>b</sup>11-12). Although one might deliberate about the end posited in one act of deliberation as a means to some further end,<sup>12</sup> the claim that we do not deliberate about ends but assume them as starting-points of deliberation motivates my contention that the virtuous agent relies on a different sort of reasoning—a distinct function of practical wisdom—to delimit the starting-points.<sup>13</sup> To see the need for a different reasoning process in fixing precise ends, consider Aristotle's description of deliberation in *E.N.* III.3:

We deliberate not about ends but about means to ends (*pros ta telē*). For the doctor does not deliberate whether to cure, nor the orator whether to persuade, nor the statesman whether to produce good order, nor does anyone else deliberate about the end. On the contrary, assuming the end they consider how and through what means it is to be attained, and if it appears to come about through several means, they consider by which means it is most easily and best attained, and if it

is achievable through one means, how it will be achieved through this and through what means that, until they come to the first cause, which is last in the order of discovery. (1112<sup>b</sup>11-20)

Aristotle attempts to clarify his conception of deliberation by comparing it to the analysis of a geometrical problem. He does not state the details but probably thinks that one analyzes a complex figure into the simple geometrical figures used in its construction.<sup>14</sup>

A passage in *Metaphysics Z.7* on a doctor's reasoning helps to articulate Aristotle's view of deliberation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:<sup>15</sup>

The health of someone sick comes about in the following way: since this is health [a well-balanced state of the body], it is necessary, if there is to be health, that this—a balance of elements—be present, and if that, heat. And he [the doctor] keeps thinking in this way until he arrives at something that he himself can finally do. (*Met. Z.7*, 1032b6-9)

Aristotle fleshes out the account a bit further:

I mean, for example, if someone is to be healthy, it is necessary to be balanced. What is it to be balanced? This, and this will be if [the patient] is heated. And what is this [i.e., being heated]? This. And this is present potentially, and is already up to him [the doctor]...and in curing perhaps the starting-point [of the production] is heating (and he [the doctor] does this by rubbing). (*Met. Z.7*, 1032b18-26)

Choice is the prescription at the termination of a deliberative process: "Heat the patient!"

In carrying out the prescription by rubbing, the doctor begins the second stage of the

process, the production proper, whose desired outcome is health, a well-balanced bodily state in the patient (*Met. Z.7*, 1032b6-17).

We should notice a peculiarity in the illustration of deliberation: Aristotle does not say that in his deliberation the doctor diagnoses the symptoms of the patient, yet the invalid's symptoms make a tremendous difference in deciding on the best means to bring about health for that person. Is the sick person suffering from a chill or from a fever? Different ailments call for different therapies, since a balance of elements will be achieved in the one case by heating and in the other by cooling. Aristotle's illustration simply assumes that the desirable goal is health for someone suffering from a chill. The example of analyzing a geometrical construction in the *Nicomachean Ethics* suffers from a related fault. In Aristotle's view a geometer need not consider variable factors, such as the size of the figure to be constructed, since geometry abstracts from variations in the diagrams used in the construction. Aristotle's treatment of deliberation is puzzling because the agent working out means to an end apparently assumes a goal free of circumstantial variation or builds the particular circumstances into the description of the goal. I shall now argue that the practical agent includes relevant details of the situation in his specification of the delimited goal.

#### 4. Right Reason and Delimited Goals

The apparent defect in the conception of deliberation and choice should spur us to consider the role of right reason (*orthos logos*) in delimiting the goal in a particular situation, so that the practical agent can use the delimited goal as the starting-point of deliberation about the appropriate course of action. Virtue establishes the goal or target

(*skopos*), but until right reason determines the target within the relevant context, the virtuous person grasps the target by an indefinite description: “Do what courage demands in this situation!” To judge from the example of deliberation in *Metaphysics Z.7*, the variables of the situation (such as the patient’s symptoms) should be built into the description of the goal to be achieved, and so there ought to be a reasoning process that discovers and uses them in specifying the goal precisely.

*E.N.* VI.1 opens with the following statement and attributes to right reason (*orthos logos*) wide-ranging functions one of which I shall discuss:

Since we have previously said that it is necessary to choose the intermediate (*to meson*), not the excess and not the deficiency, and that the intermediate is as right reason (*ho logos ho orthos*) asserts, let us distinguish this. For in all the states (*hexesi*) discussed [courage, temperance and the other virtues of character examined in III.6-V.11], as in other cases as well, there is some target (*tis skopos*) to which the person with reason looks (*pros hon apoblepōn ho ton logon echon*), and he strains and relaxes, and there is some delimited target (*tis horos*) of the mean-states (*tōn mesotētōn*), which we locate between the excess and the deficiency, since they [the mean-states] are in accordance with right reason (*kata ton orthon logon*).<sup>16</sup> (1138<sup>b</sup>18-25)

Claiming that this statement, though true, is still not clear, Aristotle gives an example to reveal the gap in his account. He says that one must not strain too much or too little but to an intermediate degree (*ta mesa*) and as right reason (*orthos logos*) dictates, and yet—he goes on—someone knowing only that much would be none the wiser about what sorts of things to apply to the body should an adviser say: “those that medicine prescribes and as

someone with that art would determine” (1138<sup>b</sup>25-32). If a medical intern confronting someone sick intends to cure him and is told to carry out procedures that medicine prescribes and as the medical expert would determine, he will be at a loss as to how to proceed without further instructions, unless he can himself diagnose the person’s ailment by identifying the symptoms and other factors relevant to the patient’s state. He must be able to describe the person’s condition in sufficient detail to grasp in a precise way the situation he intends to rectify. Here he must rely on perception and experience to diagnose the person’s illness. Only once he has that diagnosis does the practitioner have a starting-point for deliberation about appropriate means to bring about the desired outcome: health for this individual suffering from X, Y, Z symptoms, allergies to this or that medication, habits of this or that sort, and so on. In this case, as in that of the trainer prescribing the right amount of food for Milo and the young athlete, the agent needs to build a relevant description of the beneficiary into his conception of the goal.

A person habituated to behave virtuously is in a similar plight. Through practice the virtuous novice has acquired a tendency to behave as the brave man would and aims to act bravely in all situations calling for courage—to perform the intermediate action between a rash and a cowardly one. But what does courage call for in the situation at hand? Unless the person brought up in good habits can accurately interpret the situation before him he cannot begin to deliberate well about how he should act here and now or justify his behavior after the fact.<sup>17</sup> To describe the circumstances precisely he needs keen perception tempered by right reason (*orthos logos*). The whole of Book VI appears to concern the question with which the opening paragraph of VI.1 concludes: What is right reason (*ho orthos logos*) and what is its delimited target (*toutou tis horos*) (1138<sup>b</sup>34)?

Ultimately Aristotle will identify right reason in practical contexts with practical wisdom (1144<sup>b</sup>27-28) or as the active manifestation thereof, so let us start by considering practical wisdom in a preliminary way.

## 5. Practical Wisdom

Having divided the soul into three parts in Book I—the rational part, the irrational desiderative part sharing in reason, and the vegetative—in the second half of VI.1 Aristotle divides the part with reason (*logos*) into two, one enabling a person to contemplate things whose starting-points (*archai*) are invariable, the other to reflect on variable things, including variable starting-points (VI.1, 1139<sup>a</sup>6-8).<sup>18</sup> He designates the first as “scientific” (*epistēmonikon*), the second as “calculative” (*logistikon*), adding that deliberation and calculation are the same, and that no one deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise and cannot be brought about by one’s own efforts (VI.2, 1139<sup>a</sup>11-15). Aristotle proposes to consider the best state of these two rational parts of the soul, since that will be the virtue (*aretē*) of each. The virtue of the scientific part is wisdom (*sophia*), a combination of theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) able to set out a *logos* (a demonstration), and comprehension (*nous*), the grasp of invariable starting-points without a *logos* (demonstration).<sup>19</sup> The components of wisdom figure centrally in Aristotle’s account of theoretical reasoning in the *Posterior Analytics* and also receive attention in his mapping of intellectual virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.<sup>20</sup> The virtue of the calculative part of the soul—of chief importance to ethics—is practical wisdom (*phronēsis*).<sup>21</sup>

Practical wisdom resembles expertise (*technē*), such as medicine and carpentry, in dealing with variable things, but differs from expertise in that expertise concerns production, whose end (the product) is distinct from the making, whereas practical wisdom concerns action, and actions are ends in themselves performed for their own sake (VI.5, 1140<sup>b</sup>6-7).<sup>22</sup> Practical wisdom operates in the sphere of things that can be otherwise and analyzes situations in which we can make a difference through our own efforts. Aristotle gives a rough definition of practical wisdom as a true practical state (*hexis*), with reason (*meta logou*), concerning human goods—things that invite deliberation, can be otherwise, and can be brought about by us.<sup>23</sup> Being the virtue of the lower, calculative part of the rational soul, practical wisdom operates in various spheres of human life, including household management and politics, but practical wisdom proper concerns the individual, what is good for oneself (VI.8, 1141<sup>b</sup>29-30). The ability to deliberate well is a competence of practical wisdom, but because one deliberates only about means, not about ends, practical wisdom must extend beyond the reach of deliberation to include a true grasp of ends (VI.9, 1142<sup>b</sup>31-33).

In *E.N.* VI.2 Aristotle identifies choice as the starting-point of action—its efficient, not final cause—and the starting-points of choice as desire and reason for the sake of something (*logos ho heneka tou*) (1139<sup>a</sup>31-33). He has already claimed that reason asserts and desire pursues the same thing:

Since moral virtue is a state concerned with choice, and choice is deliberative desire, it is therefore necessary that, if the choice is to be a good one, the reason (*ton logon*) be true and the desire correct, and that the one (i.e., reason) assert

(*phanai*), and the other [i.e., desire] pursue (*diōkein*) the same things. (1139<sup>a</sup>21-26)

In these passages Aristotle marks off an operation of right reason distinct from choice when he speaks of right reason about ends as one of two starting-points of choice (the other being desire). Moreover, right reason extends beyond deliberation because it asserts the end whereas deliberation merely inquires into means to achieve the end.

Aristotle often makes remarks such as the following: “virtue makes the target (*ton skopon*) right, while practical wisdom makes right the things that conduce to this (*ta pros touton*)” (*E.N.* VI.12, 1144<sup>a</sup>7-9), and such statements suggest that moral virtue is sufficient on its own to determine the target and that practical wisdom works out the best means to achieve it. Yet the mention in VI.2 of reason concerning ends suggests on the contrary that moral virtue alone does not suffice in setting the goal assumed in good deliberation. In addition to moral virtue setting the general target, right reason needs to delimit the goal by taking into account the variable factors of the situation. Right reason asserts the delimited goal, so that deliberation has an adequate starting-point. This starting-point serves as the final cause of action—the end to be achieved in particular circumstances—while choice is the efficient cause of action to bring about that end.

To delimit the goal, right reason must start with particular perceptible facts about the situation calling for action—these, together with the generic injunction provided by the relevant virtue of character, articulate the starting-point.

## 6. Perception and Comprehension of Practical Starting-Points

In both theoretical and practical wisdom Aristotle calls the grasp of starting-points “comprehension” (*nous*), and I shall argue that comprehension in the two spheres is similar in grasping an object under a description. In theoretical contexts comprehension grasps a universal defined as what it is, whereas in practical contexts it identifies a particular or ascribes a feature or features to it. A practical starting-point is (or is a component of) a final cause—the goal for the sake of which (*hou heneka*) an action or series of actions should be performed—and it is a delimited goal, a goal restricted to one or more beneficiaries in particular times and places. Perception plays a vital role in both theoretical and practical contexts.

The delimited goal (*horos*) for theoretical wisdom is the starting-point (*archē*) for demonstrations, and starting-points are universals, whose definitions are true, primary, immediate, more familiar (by nature) than the conclusion and explanatory of it (*APo.* I.2, 71<sup>b</sup>19-23).<sup>24</sup> Since demonstrations rely on starting-points that explain the conclusion, there would be an explanatory regress unless the ultimate starting-points are grasped without a demonstration (I.3, 72<sup>b</sup>18-25). In *Posterior Analytics* II.19 Aristotle argues that we become familiar with the starting-points by induction (*epagōgē*) (100<sup>b</sup>3-4) based on perception: a single perception establishes a first universal in the soul (100<sup>a</sup>15-16)—a primitive cognitive impression.<sup>25</sup> From many perceptions of the same or similar things, a perceiver might have multiple impressions of the same thing, but gradually combines them and refines the resulting impression into one that becomes increasingly clear and distinct and more deeply ingrained in memory; from many memories comes experience (*empeiria*) (100a3-9). To judge from a related passage in *Metaphysics* A.1, experience

typically correlates memories, so that a doctor having recognized that a certain drug benefited Callias when he was suffering from inflammation of the eye and that the same drug benefited Socrates and others displaying the same symptoms, he arrives by induction at a generalization that all those suffering from inflammation of the eye are benefited by that drug. He can then seek an explanation of the correlation, and that advance is a sign of expertise (*technē*) (*Met.* A.1, 980<sup>a</sup>27-981<sup>b</sup>13). In the case of first principles (*archai*), the objects allow no further explanation: either they require no explanation or should be self-explanatory. Since the first principles of an Aristotelian science are definable, they should be explained through themselves by analyzing what they are in virtue of themselves (*kath' hauto*) (*APo* I.4, 73<sup>a</sup>34-<sup>b</sup>5).

In *APo* I.3 Aristotle mentions the starting-point of theoretical knowledge (*archē epistēmēs*), which enables us to become acquainted with (*gnōrizomen*) definitions (72<sup>b</sup>23-25), and in II.19 he identifies that capacity as comprehension (*nous*) and repeats that it is the starting-point of theoretical knowledge (*epistēmēs archē*) (100<sup>b</sup>5-17). Scholars dispute as to whether comprehension is a further step beyond induction of the universal from perception of the particulars—intuition, a direct awareness of intelligible objects—or simply the state achieved at the culmination of the process. I take comprehension to be a further step, though not intuitive awareness, because a great deal of work must go into establishing the real definitions of starting-points. These definitions do not merely posit a universal reached by induction but identify it as what it is in its own right, in virtue of itself (*kath' hauto*).

Whereas theoretical wisdom starts from perception and by induction arrives at a universal, and by comprehension (*nous*) grasps that universal by its invariable definable

features; practical wisdom, stimulated by perception on a particular occasion, starts from a general injunction issued by a virtue of character and then delimits that goal by identifying the particular facts pertinent to the situation, a task that calls for trained perception and experience (*empeiria*) (*E.N.* VI.8, 1142a18-19).<sup>26</sup>

Let us have before us Aristotle's statements about the role of perception in delimiting practical starting-points (I add interpretive clarifications in square brackets).

It is evident that practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is not theoretical wisdom (*epistēmē*). For it [practical wisdom] is of the ultimate [particular] (*tou eschatou*), as we have said. For the thing to be done is of that sort [particular]. It is opposed, then, to comprehension (*nous*) [in theoretical contexts]. For comprehension is of definable things (*tōn horōn*) of which there is no demonstration (*logos*), while practical wisdom is of the ultimate [particular], of which there is no theoretical knowledge but perception—not perception of the proper sensibles but the sort by which we perceive that the ultimate thing is a triangle. For it [perception] will stop there. Now this is perception rather than practical wisdom, yet a different form of perception [from that of the proper sensibles]. (*EN* VI.8, 1142<sup>a</sup>23-30)

This passage is especially useful because it includes an example and distinguishes the relevant sort of perception from perception of the proper sensibles (e.g., sight of colors, hearing of sounds) and identifies it as the perception involved in perceiving that something is a triangle. The example suggests that Aristotle is speaking of perceptual judgment exercised in identifying the particular figure before me as a triangle. A passage directly preceding the quoted text supports this construal. Aristotle says that error in deliberating concerns either the universal (*to katholou*) or the particular (*to kath'*

*hekaston*). “For,” he says, we can make a mistake “either that (*hoti*) all water that weighs heavy is bad or that (*hoti*) this [water] (*todi*) weighs heavy” (1142<sup>a</sup>21-23). The particular claim resembles the one about the triangle. Neither concerns simple perceptual awareness but the perceptual judgment that an item perceived is something (e.g., a triangle) or displays some feature (e.g., weighs heavy). Error can occur in the identification or attribution.

Consider a second passage in which Aristotle speaks of comprehension (*nous*) in grasping the invariable starting-points of theoretical wisdom and the variable starting-points of practical wisdom. Here he identifies *nous* with perception in the practical case. (Again I add interpretive material in square brackets.)

Comprehension (*nous*) is of the ultimate things in both [spheres]: *nous* without demonstration (*ou logos*) is of the primary definable things (*tōn prōtōn horōn*) [in theoretical wisdom] and of the ultimate [particular] things (*tōn eschatōn*) [in practical wisdom]. The *nous* involved in demonstrations (*apodeixeis*) is of the invariable and primary definable things, while that [i.e., *nous*] involved in practical reasoning is of the ultimate [particular] thing (*tou eschatou*) that can be otherwise, i.e., proper to the other [= minor] premise. For these are starting-points of the final cause (*tou hou heneka*). Since universals are [grasped] from particulars, one must have perception of these [the particulars], and this [perception] is *nous* (comprehension).<sup>27</sup> (VI.11, 1143<sup>a</sup>35-<sup>b</sup>5)

Comprehension of first principles in the two sorts of reasoning depends on perception but at different stages. Theoretical reasoning reaches comprehension of invariable first principles by starting from perception of particulars yielding a primitive universal in the

soul, and through induction from multiple instances arrives at a universal with contours common to the whole collection, and finally grasps a definition of it, for instance, that a triangle is a plane figure with angles equal to two right angles. Practical reasoning arrives at variable first principles by perceiving the details of a situation and identifying them. Right reason supported by perception applies a universal to a particular—for instance, in recognizing that this (figure before me) is a triangle, or that this (water before me) weighs heavy.

Contexts calling for action are much more complicated than these simple examples suggest, since the person with practical wisdom must pick out facts relevant to the situation and build an entire picture based on individual identifications and attributions. To revert to my earlier example, the person with practical wisdom has a general prescription—“Do what courage demands in this situation!” But what is this situation? The virtuous agent must identify numerous salient variables to determine what the present situation is. Only then does he have a delimited target—a diagnosis of the conditions calling for action—and only then can he begin to deliberate effectively on the course of action to take: in the terminology of medicine, determine an appropriate therapy for this case.

Perceptual judgments delimiting the goal allow the practical agent to specify the details of the situation, and thus to overcome the predicament of the medical intern being told to do what medicine prescribes and as the expert doctor would determine. The virtues of character indicate the goal in a general way, but the virtuous person with practical wisdom can fill in the relevant details of the case at hand so as to determine the goal precisely and then work out and choose the intermediate action to address it.

## 7. Virtue and Practical Wisdom

In *E.N.* VI.12-13 Aristotle argues that virtue in the strict sense (*kuria*) is impossible without practical wisdom and that reasoning without virtue is mere cleverness, not practical wisdom at all. Virtue and practical wisdom require each other. Although we learn to be brave and temperate and to have the other virtues of character through practice engaging in brave and temperate actions, and in this way acquire a firm and lasting state to behave as we should, without practical wisdom our good performance lacks the correct motives, since we do not yet understand why the right action in any given situation is right. Acting rightly is a matter of luck, since we lack a delimited goal. Until the agent has developed practical wisdom he is not really virtuous but resembles the medical intern telling himself “Cure the patient!” without the wherewithal to determine what precisely he needs to do in the situation at hand. The courageous novice tends to choose and perform the right action in the circumstances but without knowing why it is right. He can easily make mistakes until he learns to appreciate the relevant factors of the particular situation calling for action. On the other hand, good reasoning without moral virtue is mere cleverness, not practical wisdom at all, though practical wisdom develops from it. Aristotle identifies a capacity (*dunamis*) that enables people to set goals for themselves, work out how to achieve them, and hit the mark (VI.12, 1144<sup>a</sup>20-25). If the target is noble, the cleverness deserves praise, but if it is base, it is unscrupulousness. Although practical wisdom stems from this capacity, it differs from mere cleverness because virtue posits the correct general target.<sup>28</sup> Exercising right reason, practical wisdom delimits that target in light of the circumstances and then determines the intermediate action by which to achieve it.

VI.13 opens with a proportion: as cleverness is to practical wisdom, so natural virtue is to authoritative (*kuria*) virtue (1144<sup>b</sup>1-4).<sup>29</sup> The second member of each pair develops out of the first: practical wisdom develops from mere cleverness when virtue sets its general target, and authoritative virtue develops from natural virtue—acquired through habituation—when it is accompanied by practical wisdom able to delimit the goal in variable situations and then to deliberate about and choose the intermediate action to address it.

Aristotle distinguishes his position from two others—Socrates' view that the virtues are all forms of practical wisdom (1144<sup>b</sup>17-21), and the view he attributes to everyone defining virtue, that virtue is a state in accordance with right reason (*kata ton orthon logon*) and right reason in accordance with practical wisdom (1144<sup>b</sup>21-24). While he agrees with the second view, he thinks it falls short, because it allows those with mere natural virtue to count as genuinely virtuous on the grounds that they tend to do the right thing. He therefore sharpens his position by saying that virtue—that is, virtue in the strict sense—is a state with right reason (*meta tou orthou logou*), and here identifies right reason in moral contexts with practical wisdom (1144<sup>b</sup>25-30). Developed moral virtue is not simply identical with, or a species of, reason as Socrates thought, because moral virtue and practical wisdom are states of different parts of the soul (the desiderative part obedient to reason and the rational calculative part). But neither is virtue merely in accordance with (*kata*) right reason, because virtuous acts might conform to the dictates of right reason from a third person perspective without being the product of the agent's own rational assessment. True moral virtue and practical wisdom are interdependent and must cooperate in identifying and executing the intermediate action.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Reading  $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \omega(v\ \alpha\lambda\eta\ \nu$  at 1107a1 with Broadie and Rowe (2002). This is the regular formulation of similar statements in Book VI, e.g., at 1138<sup>b</sup>31-32 quoted below.

<sup>2</sup> In this volume, see the excellent paper by James Allen comparing and contrasting inquiry in theoretical and practical wisdom.

<sup>3</sup> Though see Wiggins ([1975] 1980, esp. 231-37) and McDowell ([1979] 1998).

<sup>4</sup> *E.N.* I.13, 1102<sup>b</sup>13-14; 1102<sup>b</sup>30-1103<sup>a</sup>3.

<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see Young (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Brown (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Brown (1997: 78).

<sup>8</sup> This distinction is well discussed by Young (1996).

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Bommarito points out to me the case of the chronic fault-finder, who takes the details of each situation into account, and then finds something to complain about in that situation. Such a person has plenty of flexibility in gauging different situations but nonetheless displays a consistent pattern in her response. The virtuous person is flexible both in gauging the situation and in performing the right action to address the situation.

<sup>10</sup> The irascible man might err in either of two ways: he might respond vehemently regardless of the degree of provocation or might be overly sensitive to the situation and always overreact. I thank Nicolas Bommarito for this observation. See also previous note.

<sup>11</sup> See Young's (1996) discussion of the mean-state of anger.

<sup>12</sup> See Cooper (1975: 14-18).

<sup>13</sup> Here I differ from Wiggins ([1975] 1980), who regards delimiting goals, what he calls "situational appreciation," as an operation of deliberation.

<sup>14</sup> See Cooper (1975: 20, 37-38).

<sup>15</sup> Again see Cooper (1975: 20-22) on the passages in *Met. Z.7*.

<sup>16</sup> My translation of *horos* as "delimited target" (LSJ gives "boundary," "standard," "term," "definition") will doubtless be contentious, and perhaps the word would best be left untranslated here, since it is obscure what Aristotle means, but I take the liberty of using my translation, because I believe that Aristotle needs a word for the delimited goal as distinct from the more general word *skopos*, and that this need becomes evident in the example he gives later in the same paragraph discussed below.

<sup>17</sup> I agree with Cooper (1975: 5-10) that Aristotle's account does not call for deliberation prior to each virtuous act: in many cases one will simply act, though if called upon to justify what one has done, one should be able to give a justification, the deliberative reasoning one might have gone through in deciding what to do.

<sup>18</sup> The variability of the starting-points in practical reasoning is also implied at VI.5, 1140<sup>a</sup>31-<sup>b</sup>4, and VI.11, 1143<sup>a</sup>35-<sup>b</sup>5.

<sup>19</sup> On this topic, see esp. *APo* I.2 and II.19.

<sup>20</sup> See *EN* VI.5, 1140<sup>a</sup>33-35; VI.7, 1141<sup>a</sup>18-19; VI.8, 1142<sup>a</sup>26.

<sup>21</sup> VI.5, 1040<sup>b</sup>25-28; cf. 11, 1143<sup>b</sup>14-17.

<sup>22</sup> On expertise, see also VI.2, 1139<sup>b</sup>1-3. The whole of VI.4 focuses on expertise.

<sup>23</sup> VI.5, 1140<sup>b</sup>4-6, 1140<sup>b</sup>20-21; cf. 1140<sup>b</sup>24-28; VI.7, 1141<sup>b</sup>8-12.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle frequently invokes the distinction between what is more familiar to us and what is more familiar and prior by nature: things more familiar to us are perceptible particulars, while things more familiar by nature are universals, furthest from perception (e.g., *APo*. I.2, 71<sup>b</sup>33-72<sup>a</sup>5).

<sup>25</sup> I find it useful in thinking about primitive and more settled universals in the soul in terms of Plato's Wax Block model in the *Theaetetus*. The perceiver first gains a primitive universal on his mental wax, like the stamp of a signet ring, and after further encounters combines numerous impressions into one which, when developed and refined, the cognitive impression, becomes increasingly useful in recognizing the same thing in future perceptual encounters.

<sup>26</sup> See also VI.7, 1041<sup>b</sup>14-21.

<sup>27</sup> I read the second  $\gamma\alpha/r$  at 1143<sup>b</sup>4 as anticipatory, justifying the claim in the final clause with its inferential  $\omicron\upsilon\eta\lambda\theta\eta\iota$ . See Smyth (1984: §2811) and Denniston (1954: 68-71).

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<sup>28</sup> VI.12, 1044<sup>a</sup>28-31, with 1044<sup>a</sup>4-9. This passage seems highly reminiscent of a passage in Plato's Allegory of the Cave in which Socrates claims that education is not like putting sight into blind eyes. We are born with a capacity (*dunamis*), keen and sharp, but whether it is useful and beneficial or useless and harmful depends on the way it is turned (*Rep.* VII, 518b7-519a7).

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle makes an obvious error by reversing the first two terms, but corrects himself at 1144<sup>b</sup>14-17. The error is pointed out by Broadie and Rowe (2002: 383).

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Nicolas Bommarito and David Charles for discussing this project with me.

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