

Aristotle on Practical Wisdom

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Aristotle tells us that practical wisdom concerns both universals and particulars. Despite little agreement about the details, scholars have traditionally understood this dual nature of practical wisdom as referring to knowledge of ethical universals (or rules) and (practical) perception of particulars. I depart from this tradition and argue that the central feature of Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom is self-knowledge, understood as both knowledge of human nature in general (the universal aspect) and knowledge of one's own particular practical self (the particular aspect). Besides offering an argument for this view, I also argue that it enables us to successfully tackle various claims about practical wisdom that continue to baffle interpreters. I single out two such issues. (1) Aristotle claims that in ethics we can make universal claims only with a limited degree of precision and must rely on senses (rather than universal reasoning) for precision in particular circumstances. Unlike interpreters who see Aristotle as expressing skepticism about universal truths in ethics, I argue that he is best understood as drawing an analogy between ethics and medicine. Both are universal bodies of knowledge (one concerning the human soul, the other the human body) but both also need to operate with understanding (or diagnoses) of individual persons. Although such understanding of particular cases can be achieved and stated, it cannot be (for obvious reasons) achieved by reasoning or stated universally. (2) Aristotle claims that practical wisdom cannot exist without moral virtue. This claim is traditionally understood as meaning (roughly) that practical wisdom (if it is to be practical) must issue in action (of a certain sort) and it cannot do so without moral virtue (which provides the motivational force to act). The problem is that, on this picture, a non-virtuous agent (e.g., the self-controlled or the uncontrolled one) can have the same knowledge as the virtuous agent, even if that knowledge is not practical (issuing in action). Although Aristotle clearly denies this consequence, commentators have been hard pressed to say why. I argue that the kind of knowledge that constitutes practical wisdom essentially involves understanding and acceptance of the truth of the normative or ideal development of human nature. Such understanding cannot be acquired (i.e., accepted and believed to be true) without appropriately attuned sensibility to the fine or beautiful order and workings of nature in general and of human nature in particular. But to develop the right sensibility to things insofar as they are fine or beautiful (*kala*) just is to develop virtue of character as Aristotle understands it. In other words, one can only truly believe what human beings should be like (in fact, what they really *are* like) if one is sufficiently similar to that ideal development. Consequently, the full or complete knowledge that constitutes practical wisdom is available only to the virtuous agent.