Practical Wisdom and Politics

In discussing Book I in subunit 1.6, you learned that the Ethics specifically addresses the close relationship between ethical inquiry and politics. At the outset, Aristotle proclaims his purpose of finding the highest good for which virtuous action is undertaken, and the science concerned with this good is political science. Among the sciences, for Aristotle, political science is the most authoritative in that it prescribes which sciences should be taught as well as legislates what must be done and what must be avoided. It also incorporates the ends to which the other sciences are a means and does so not merely for the individual but for the polis as a whole.

From that beginning point forward, Aristotle launches into his ethical inquiry, with its emphasis on personal virtue. Politics, as we might generally understand it, recedes into the background. As Malcolm Schofield comments, “For us, ethics and politics signify two distinct, if overlapping, spheres. For Aristotle, there is just one sphere – politics – conceived in ethical terms.”¹ As with Aristotle’s appeal to practical as opposed to theoretical or pure reason when engaging in ethical inquiry, although Aristotle focuses on what it means for an individual to be virtuous, what is virtuous is determined through contingency, meaning it is dependent upon and conditioned by the world which we inhabit.

In subunit 1.6.1, you learned that for Aristotle virtue is divided into two sorts that correspond to the rational and nonrational parts of the soul. The rational part is that which has reason within itself or is reason “through-and-through,” while the nonrational part is capable of being influenced by reason. Book VI of the Ethics first addresses the nonrational part of the soul, which is integral to Book X and the transition made from the Ethics to Aristotle’s Politics. Here, we first address the intellectual virtues applied to the nonrational parts of the soul in Book VI, or the virtues of thought associated with our emotions, feelings, dispositions, and actions, before turning to Book X.

Recall again that at the beginning of the Ethics, Aristotle describes his inquiry as an attempt to develop a better understanding of what our ultimate aim should be. The tentative and rather vague answer he gives in Book I is that happiness consists in virtuous activity. In Books II through V, he describes the virtues of the part of the soul that is rational in that it can be attentive to reason, even though it is not capable of deliberation:

For in all the states of character we have mentioned, as well as in the others, there is a target which the person who has reason focuses on and so tightens or relaxes; and there is a definition of the means, which we say are between excess and deficiency because they express correct reason.

To say this is admittedly true, but it is not at all clear. For in other pursuits directed by a science it is equally true that we must labor and be idle neither too much nor too little, but the intermediate amount prescribed by correct reason. But knowing only this, we would be none the wiser, e.g. about the medicines to be applied to the body, if we were told we must apply the ones that medical science prescribes and in the way that the medical scientist applies them.

Similarly, then, our account of the states of the soul must not only be true up to this point: we must also determine what correct reason is, i.e. what its definition is.²

In Book VI, Aristotle discusses various kinds of intellectual virtues: theoretical wisdom, science, intuitive understanding, practical wisdom, and craft expertise. If what we know about virtue is only what is said in Books II through V, we are left unaware or even inert with regard to our actions, because we have not examined the intellectual virtue that enables us to reason well in any given situation, i.e. we have not come to examine practical wisdom. It has been said in sub-subunit 1.6.2 that the doctrine of the mean provides a structure that helps us understand what is virtuous and shows what is attractive about the virtues. But as far as offering a decision procedure, what must be done on any particular occasion by a virtuous agent depends on circumstances. There can be no complete theoretical guide to ethics; the best we can hope for is that in particular situations our ethical habits and practical wisdom will help us determine what to do.

So, for our purposes here, as we look toward Book X, we are primarily concerned with practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom. Practical wisdom is a form of individual understanding which operates through deliberation about what to do in particular situations. It is associated with contingent or action-related truth, where truth agrees with correct desire effective in producing appropriate action. For example, a

courageous person on the battlefield wants to take a course of action to obtain a particular goal but remains appropriately calm and patient in coming to a correct assessment of the enemy’s position and strength before taking that action. Theoretical wisdom, on the other hand, focuses on the universal truth of things which cannot be otherwise. As the virtue or excellence of the rational part of the soul, it must deal with universal and necessary truths: other sorts are less sure and less general. Theoretical wisdom is comprised not just of knowledge of what follows from a science’s first principles (e.g. of mathematics or astronomy), but also of the understanding of those first principles themselves: “Hence the wise person must not only know what is derived from the origins of a science, but also grasp the truth about the origins. Therefore, wisdom is understanding plus scientific knowledge; it is scientific knowledge of the most honourable things that has received understanding as its coping-stone.”

Practical wisdom and political science reside within the same disposition or state of mind of the individual but with different scopes in the sense that political science is practical wisdom exercised in the political sphere. In this sense, practical wisdom as political science is directed not at particulars but universally in the sense that its scope is that of the polis: what practical wisdom accomplishes in relation to the individual, political science accomplishes in relation to the polis. In Aristotle’s view, the individual citizen’s exercise of practical wisdom is fostered and takes place under the legislative authority and architectonic guidance of the community to which the citizen belongs. The extent of such authority and guidance is large: the aim of political science is to enable citizens to be virtuous by enacting and enforcing appropriate universal laws. Deliberation by individuals comes into play where universal laws do not apply or where they leave much in the way of interpretation with regard to particulars because of the degree to which they abstract from concrete situations to be of sufficient, architectonic scope. However, even here for Aristotle, how we come to deliberate and the manner in which we do so is highly dependent upon the legal context in which the capacity for deliberation comes to develop over time into practical wisdom.

In Book X, Aristotle states that the exercise of theoretical wisdom in contemplation is the supreme element of happiness, while that of the exercise of practical wisdom is secondary when it comes to happiness. At first glance, this might come as a bit of surprise, given that Aristotle has sustained an argument throughout the Ethics that attacks Plato’s departure point from (and celebration of) theoretical wisdom. Recall from subunit 1.6 that one of the most striking aspects of the Ethics is that Aristotle sets

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3 Ibid, pg. 157, (1141a 18)
out to divorce ethical inquiry from the theoretical inquiry associated with Platonic metaphysics; ethics as a field is to stand on its own. For Aristotle, Plato’s Theory of Forms is irrelevant to ethics: “for even if the Good predicated in common is some single thing, or something separated, itself in itself, clearly it is not the sort of good a human being can pursue in action or possess; but that is just the sort we are looking for in our present inquiry.”4

In Book X, although Aristotle does hold that the life of the philosopher—a life spent in study and contemplation—is the most choice worthy of lives to be led, in a rather straightforward manner he turns Plato’s system on its head. Instead of an ideal world that could only come to be through and be maintained by philosopher-kings, Aristotle presents philosophers and the practice of philosophy as entirely dependent upon practical wisdom and the polis. In order to practice philosophy, Aristotle emphasizes that the philosopher will need the ethical virtues in order to live such a life of contemplation, even though exercising those virtues is not the philosopher’s ultimate end. To be adequately equipped to live a life of thought and discussion, a philosopher will need practical wisdom, temperance, justice, and the other ethical virtues. Ethical activity promotes this lofty goal of living the contemplative life, which is fully compatible with Aristotle’s arguments presented thus far to Book X in the Ethics.

Consider the logical character of Aristotle’s reasons for presenting of the political life as secondary to that of one spent in contemplation. There are drawbacks inherent in ethical and political activity; for instance, they are taxing in terms of effort. Ethical activities are remedial: they are needed when something has gone wrong, or when there is a threat that something will go wrong. Courage, for example, is exercised in war, and war remedies an evil; it is not something we should wish for. As war aims at peace, work as an activity aims at leisure, which is required for contemplation. Contemplation is a good in itself; therefore, it is superior to that which is a means to it. Practical wisdom associated with the ethical and political life is thus a steward of theoretical wisdom, procuring leisure for it and its function.

In congruence with the doctrine of the mean, Aristotle points out that a human being cannot live on contemplation alone—friends and other external goods are required to live the philosophical life. Further, to contemplate well, a person’s cravings, appetites, and feelings must be under control if they are not to be distracting. For Aristotle, a

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habituated readiness to sacrifice external goods for contemplation would not promote a happy life nearly as well as having the virtues of character.

Beyond these straightforward reasons for the importance of practical wisdom and the political life to that of theoretical wisdom and the contemplative life, for Aristotle practical wisdom as political science in the form of legislation is constitutive for the possibility of both virtues of character and intellectual virtues as passed down through education and habituation to future citizens. Aristotle devotes the entire final chapter of Book X of the *Ethics* to the architectonic scope of education, habituation, and legislation. Although Aristotle’s study of virtue is meant as didactic to be helpful to an audience that has already been brought up well, it also buttresses his arguments along larger lines as to the nature of human beings and society. For Aristotle, the political dimensions of virtue are integral to the overall framework of what it means to live a good life, and with his treatment of this framework complete, he now turns to address the structures of legislation and governance itself.