



Practical Wisdom in Ancient Greek Thought

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Abstract

Western philosophers were initially more interested in theoretical contemplation and in understanding nature than in life's practical issues. Although we can find expressions of practical wisdom in Greek tragedy and in Homeric poetry, Socrates first introduced philosophy as a form of practical wisdom that seeks to grasp what is genuinely valuable in life. Within Greek philosophy, then, practical wisdom is mainly an exploration of how human beings can achieve a happy life through their actions. This chapter begins by examining what the historical Socrates took practical wisdom or *phronesis* to be. Then it considers the conception of practical wisdom in the writings of Plato and Aristotle.

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Introduction

Practical wisdom appears in ancient thought as the use of intelligence focused on the most important question in life, namely how to correctly decide. Thus, as opposed to the use of intelligence for obtaining something useful or for cultivating theory, practical wisdom appears as a type of knowledge that is key to life in that it permits one to know oneself. This chapter explores how this concept, which initially caught the attention of poets in Ancient Greece, was later developed in depth by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and eventually became a cornerstone of Western thought.

We will first look at how Socrates links practical wisdom with the soul and the recognition of one's ignorance. Then, we will examine how Plato elaborates on Socrates' idea of practical wisdom to present prudence as a kingly art, that is, a form of knowledge aimed at governing one's life through proportionality. Finally, we will show how Aristotle focuses practical wisdom on the use of prudence in deliberation.

The Historical Socrates: Practical Wisdom as Self-knowledge

As commonly recognized, Western philosophy was initiated in Greece around the sixth century BC. Although initially interested in understanding nature rather than life's practical issues, Socrates shifted things by introducing philosophy as a form of practical wisdom in search of happiness. His inquiry into what living a worthy life means was continued by his disciple Plato and then further so by Aristotle.

Socrates himself did not write anything. Nevertheless, the writings of his peer Aristophanes, of his informal "student" and friend Plato, and of other ancient Greeks enable us to draw some conclusions concerning Socrates' understanding of practical wisdom. For example, classicists agree that this description of Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (1969) has elements of the truth (Edmunds 2004):

You swagger in the streets and cast your eyes sideways,
and, going barefoot, endure many ills, and put on a grave face
on our account. (Aristophanes 1969, pp. 362–363)

This satirical passage refers primarily to Socrates' external behavior but also suggests some crucial dimensions of his understanding of practical wisdom. The Greek verb translated as "to swagger" appears to refer to the walk of a bird like the puffin (Edmunds 2004). It need not mean an arrogant "swagger" but may denote instead the gait of a man moving very erectly with his chest puffed out. Alcibiades applies the same verb to Socrates in his description of Socrates' bearing. In Plato's *Symposium* (1961e), Alcibiades notes that Socrates always moved

purposefully and steadily (even when retreating on the battlefield), exactly the kind of behavior we would expect from someone who is committed to fearing one thing alone – failing to live well. Aristophanes’ phrase “in the streets” is equally striking. All sources agree that Socrates spent a lot of time walking around the streets of Athens talking with people he encountered and examining their views on human excellence.

The latter part of Aristophanes’ description suggests that the historical Socrates cared little for wealth and its accouterments. Several sources confirm that Socrates would walk around barefoot and possessed but a single cloak (Edmunds 2004). He seems to have slept on the ground and endured the bitterest cold wearing this lightweight cloak (Plato Symposium 1961e). For Socrates, practical wisdom consists in striving to understand what is most valuable in life, not in acquiring money.

As for his “grave face,” Socrates was known for raising his eyebrows when in conversation with others (Edmunds 2004). While this gesture might be interpreted as one of superciliousness, it could just as easily express Socrates’ questioning attitude and his willingness to doubt the claims put forth by his interlocutors – e.g., that beauty consists in having gold (Plato Greater Hippias 1961a).

When we turn from the historical Socrates’ physical deportment to the content of his documented verbal claims, we discover that various sources agree on certain key points. As already suggested, ethics are central to the historical Socrates’ project. Ancient sources consistently depict Socrates as someone who is obsessed, for example, with the nature of justice and injustice. Socrates repeatedly questions his interlocutors about human excellence and the virtues (Wolfsdorf 2017). In Plato’s *Apology* (1961d), Socrates explicitly denies that he has ever had any interest in so-called natural philosophy. Commenting on the historical Socrates, Aristotle (1999) describes Socrates as having exerted himself on ethical matters (*ta ēthika*) and not at all on the whole of nature (*Metaphysics* 987b1-2). Thus, the historical Socrates was interested in practical wisdom; his interest lay in wisdom’s ability to help human beings resolve key questions about the nature of human excellence and to enable us to become virtuous. Unlike later modern writers such as Hobbes and Rousseau, Socrates did not think that we could derive human excellence, virtues, or vices from a theoretical account of nature at large or as a whole. Further, Socrates did not believe, as Kant did, that there are any laws of ethics akin to the universal natural laws of sciences. Insight and practical wisdom arise from practical encounters and informal conversations with fellow citizens about human excellence.

Socratic ethics overlap with political concerns. Like other ancient Greeks, the historical Socrates does not sharply distinguish ethics from politics. Each of us grows up in a community governed and organized by some political constitution or regime (democracy, oligarchy, etc.). Personal and civic identities are closely intertwined as evidenced by the ancient Greek emphasis on courage as a key virtue (Plato *Laches* 1961b; Plato *Republic* 1961; Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 2014, henceforth NE).

In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates refers to his *daimonion*. Xenophon (1968), too, refers to the historical Socrates’ belief that he was guided in action and in ethical thinking by a divine influence. Additional evidence for the Socratic *daimonion* can be found in writings of Aeschines of Sphettus, Antisthenes, Xenophon, and Euclides

(Wolfsdorf 2017). This *daimonion* seems to have been less of an entity and more of a practical presence (Burkert 1985). In any case, Socratic practical wisdom was at the least informed by something divine.

If this is so, then the historical Socrates' ethical thought appears to have been eudaemonistic (Xenophon 1968). That is, Socrates' ethical thought revolved around the notion that our goal in life is to live a good or happy (eudaemonistic) life. In the fifth century, eudaemonism was taken literally in its etymological sense – a good life can only be lived with the help of an ethically good (*eu-*) divine (*daimon*) influence (Wolfsdorf 2017).

The elements of the historical Socrates' practical thought come together in the notion of the soul or *psyche*. Prior to and into the fifth century, the *psyche* did not refer to an entity or substantial unity. Instead, it meant something like “life” or “vital spirit” (Wolfsdorf 2017). Aristotle treats the *psyche* as the first actuality of an organic body that is potentially alive (Aristotle *De Anima* 2016). For Aristotle, the soul is construed as an entity or substance. It is less clear how Plato viewed the soul. In the *Phaedo* (1961c), for example, the *psyche* can be understood as referring to an individual's organizing commitments that give unity to life taken as a whole. We have no evidence that the historical Socrates conceived of excellences as habits or as distinct capacities of a soul entity or substance. Indeed, evidence that the historical Socrates had a theory of the soul is virtually nonexistent. However, we do know from many sources that Socrates was interested in human excellences. We would suggest that the historical Socrates saw these excellences as manifestations or features of a good life. Living this life required a commitment to seeking to acquire knowledge about the right way to live. To the extent that we need knowledge or practical wisdom to live well, then we might think of *sophia* or wisdom as the expression of soul where soul is not considered a substance but rather a life-defining, guiding, organizing, and unifying practical commitment.

Socrates' peers associate wisdom with the soul. For example, Aristophanes does so (Wolfsdorf 2017). Therefore, it is not implausible that the historical Socrates made such an association as well. Moreover, the historical Socrates is willing to accept that he is practically wise in a very limited sense. As Socrates says in Plato's *Apology* (1961d), he is perhaps humanly wise in one respect only – namely, that he knows that he does not know and that this knowledge motivates his quest to know. In that respect, *psyche* might reasonably be described as central to Socrates' practical thought.

What, then, constitutes practical knowledge in the case of the historical Socrates? Numerous sources suggest that he viewed all practical excellences as a form of practical knowledge (Wolfsdorf 2017). If practical knowledge is the same as – or at least partially constitutive of – practical wisdom, then all human excellence or virtue is a form of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Since Socrates never wrote an ethical treatise and rather devoted his life to inquiry into human excellence, it seems unlikely that he would have thought of practical wisdom as a set body of knowledge that he had mastered and that he believed could be transmitted in the form of a treatise on ethics. Instead, the extant evidence suggests rather that, at most, Socrates knew that he did not have technical knowledge of human excellence. He did not

identify any certain principles grounding a scientific body of knowledge that he was willing to promulgate as his version of ethics. On the contrary, the fact that he went about questioning others regarding matters he thought central to a noble and good life and that he did so until the very end of his life suggests that the historical Socrates did not think anyone else had technical knowledge of the good either.

Socrates believed that all of us are equals in our not-knowing. If anything differentiates us, it is whether or not we choose to commit to admitting our practical ignorance and then seeking to set about rectifying it. By making such a commitment and then acting on it throughout his life, Socrates was able to lead a unified life. Are we justified in calling his life good and happy? Although some mocked him, many found his life inspiring. At least some sources portray him as going cheerfully and courageously to his death (Plato *Phaedo* 1961c). If we accept these sources as accurate, his life certainly seems to have embodied a modicum of virtue understood in eudaemonistic terms.

Thus, the *daimonion* enters the picture, too, as an aspect of practical wisdom. This divine presence never tells Socrates what to do, but it does warn him whenever he is in danger of doing something that he suspects may be unjust. The *daimonion* can thus also be seen as an aspect of Socrates' *psyche* or life-governing commitment to always act in a manner consistent with his practical knowledge that he knows that he does not know. If an authority were to demand that Socrates perform some action that the authority maintains is just but that Socrates thinks may be unjust, the wise course of action is to have a conversation about what justice is in the case in question, rather than to proceed mechanically in accordance with the authority's command. In that sense, Socrates' *daimonion* could be said to warn against such mechanical behavior. And we can consider the warning "divine" in a limited sense because Socrates' second thoughts come to him when engaged with a practical issue or question. They arise spontaneously; he does not will or summon them.

Although it is difficult to say much more about the historical Socrates' conception of practical wisdom, we can perhaps flesh out the conception more fully in light of Aristophanes' charges against Socrates. Nussbaum (1980) contends that Aristophanes levels three charges at the historical Socrates and that each has merit. The first claim is that Socrates (whom Aristophanes depicts in *The Clouds* as floating around with his feet not touching the ground) has lost contact with reality because Socrates fails to grasp the crucial role played by character and the habituation of desire. Nussbaum contends that Aristophanes rightly judges that Socrates places too much faith in the intellect and does not recognize our intellect can be subverted by desire and converted into desire's handmaiden. Socratic intellectualism ignores the demands of the body and fails to help young people with the practical challenge of navigating their way through a material world (Euben 1996). Instead, it "enables a corrupt character to be more effectively corrupt" (Kastely 1997). In this respect, Socrates' practical wisdom, according to Nussbaum's Aristophanes, is not really all that wise.

The second charge is that Socrates criticizes others' understanding of justice, courage, government, and so forth but fails to offer a positive theory of ethics. The third charge is that Socrates does not adequately clarify for his interlocutors the

difference between good and bad arguments, leaving them confused and cynical. So again Socrates' practical wisdom looks pathetic rather than profound.

These charges, though, seriously misinterpret the character of Socratic practical wisdom. Socrates obviously knows that we need food and shelter. But it is abundantly clear that human beings have evolved many arts for coping with the material world. We have plenty of arts for dealing with our physical needs and are inventing new ones all of the time. The Socratic insight concerns what it means to lead a happy *human* life. Happiness does not consist in mere coping with natural demands. Nor is a life of eating and drinking distinctively human. A happy life does not eschew material resources; Socrates is not anti-materialistic. But such a life does require – Socrates thinks – that we use our intelligence to shape and organize our lives. Otherwise, we are just a lot of flotsam and jetsam driven hither and thither by passing desires. When we draw upon our intelligence, we then discover that none of us possesses a science or a set of techniques for forging a unified life for ourselves (Griswold 1988). Socrates' remarkable practical discovery is that a specific form of self-knowledge – i.e., knowing that we do not have this kind of technical or scientific knowledge – can help us construct such a life. For such self-knowledge can spur us to examine collectively and dialogically what kinds of actions seem best suited to a satisfying and distinctively human existence. Through such discussions, we can gain in understanding, even if we never arrive at certain, comprehensive accounts of human excellence. Being able to actualize that possibility is itself, for the historical Socrates, a form of practical wisdom.

However, each of us must turn our own lives around. No one else can make a psychic commitment for us. Socrates does not think that he or any self-proclaimed teacher can make the young into better people simply by telling them some supposed moral truths. So the third of Nussbaum's charges is largely irrelevant. The second one is as well insofar as Socrates does not think there is any sound practical "dogma" that we should be serving up as moral pabulum to the masses. Those with whom he converses already have enough decency to talk with him in at least a somewhat civil manner. His interlocutors are concerned enough about justice and other human excellences to want to talk with Socrates about these virtues. Thus society has been doing a sufficiently good job of morally inoculating citizens against depravity that it would not appear to require yet another positive dogma from Socrates. Ancient and modern communities continue to produce moral teachers in vast numbers, so society is in no danger of running out of positive teachings. What is needed is some way to confront the various positive moral claims being made and to do so in a way that enables one to have a happy life. That is precisely what Socrates, with his own unique form of practical wisdom, is able to do. His life itself is its own kind of teaching if we choose to know ourselves as he did.

Plato's View: Practical Wisdom as Royal Art

The question of practical wisdom in Plato's case is deeply influenced by Socrates and by the cultural environment of his time. Plato lived during a period of decaying Athenian power, and, in his dialogues, he described a relativistic cultural mood in

which the sophists, as educators, taught rhetoric (understood as a way of speaking persuasively in order to prevail over others) as the main source of practical wisdom. In ancient times, practical wisdom was understood as a kind of knowledge directed toward life: what should I do in order to be happy? The sophists gave new answers for a newly democratic society – to prosper in life means knowing how to use words, how to manipulate the auditory sense in order to achieve what one sees fit. The sophist position contained, in the end, a new way of understanding justice and power.

The best example of a relativistic view of justice can be found in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In this well-known story, the Athenians used their mighty naval power to invade Melos. The Melians tried to argue with the Athenians to prevent the invasion, for example, by stating that it would not be just or right to make them slaves based solely on Athens' power when Melos had not caused any trouble. The Athenians replied that justice is a term only valid between equals but makes no sense when there is a superior power: "The standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept" (Thucydides 1972, V.90). The Athenians had a practical, political reason for conquering the Melians, namely, they would demonstrate their power to the rest of the Hellas and strengthen the Athenian empire. In the logic of power, the only thing that matters is power itself. Against these arguments, the Melians answer that there must be some kind of justice or rightness beyond the use of force. The Athenians, however, point out that justice is only the domination of the strongest, and it is useless to think that there might be punishment from the gods: "It is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can" (Thucydides 1972, V.106).

In the Sophists' account, power, taken as the ability to express force, should be exercised to its furthest and possible extent. Power is the ability to dominate others to control their actions. There is no moral barrier to the use of power because power is the only rule that prevails. Practical reason is, therefore, the intelligent use of resources in order to attain power. This is, in fact, the sophist account of power and justice, as Plato also clearly depicts in his dialogues.

Plato, nevertheless, tries to show that practical wisdom is more than the rational ability to impose one's will on others. Practical wisdom is mainly the ability to find what is best suited for life, which is only possible by trying to seek what is noble and just. In short, practical wisdom is not instrumental rationality aimed at the means to reach an end but rather a deep reflection about the ends that are worth seeking and how to order our means toward them. In this sense, Plato understands practical wisdom as a form of self-knowledge. In the dialogue *Charmides*, Plato tries to clarify the concept of temperance and the meaning of the Delphic expression "know thyself" as follows, "This, I think, was the intention of the man who dedicated the inscription: essentially, he's claiming that what the god is saying to anyone who enters the shrine is 'Be self-controlled'" (Plato *Charmides* 2005, 164 d). To be self-

controlled is to know one's self, i.e., possessing self-control that comes from knowing one's path in life. Of course, for Plato, this concept of self-knowledge does not connote the subject's direct knowledge of himself; he is not referring to an activity of self-consciousness, as modern thinkers speak of self-knowledge (Oehler 1997, pp. 24–25), but rather refers to awareness of the real value of one's own actions (Ebert 1974, p. 58). Practical knowledge for Plato has to do with knowing what is best in life, which is only possible in as much as we know ourselves and what is worth pursuing. We face, therefore, a very peculiar and difficult-to-define form of knowledge that does not follow the art of the sciences.

On the one hand, if practical knowledge were an art (*techne*, practical skill), then it would produce something, yet it does not. Virtue, as a form of practical knowledge, is not a productive skill because to know what is best in life does not produce anything. The shoemaker has the practical skill of making shoes, but the man with practical knowledge does not produce anything. On the other hand, if practical knowledge were science (*episteme*, theoretical knowledge), it would have a particular object of study, yet it also does not (Plato *Meno* 2005, 99c). The different sciences have a particular object of study, i.e., the astronomer studies the sky, the mathematician the relations between numbers, etc. A virtuous person is not an expert in something in particular, and he does not necessarily know much about anything. Socrates, who is Plato's model of practical knowledge, would say that he knew nothing in particular but that he knew, at least, that he was ignorant with respect to almost everything:

But, gentlemen, these professional experts seemed to share the same failing which I had noticed in the poets. I mean that on the strength of their technical proficiency they claimed a perfect understanding of every other subject, however important, and I felt that this error more than outweighed their positive wisdom. So I made myself spokesman for the oracle, and asked myself whether I would rather be as I was—neither wise with their wisdom nor stupid with their stupidity—or possess both qualities as they did. I replied through myself to the oracle that it was best for me to be as I was. (Plato *Apology* 1961d, 22 d-e)

Socrates' statement of his own ignorance in the *Apology* points to a level of knowledge that is previous and deeper than that of the sciences and crafts. Socrates does not practice a science or craft, but he is able to acknowledge his own ignorance, and this self-disposition makes him wiser than anyone else (Napolitano 2011, p. 168) because people who possess these skills think they know, but they do not really know anything. Socrates is at least aware of the limits of his knowledge, and he realizes his true (diminutive) stature with respect to wisdom (Plato *Apology* 1961d, 23 b).

Self-knowledge consists, according to Plato, in acknowledgement of one's ignorance and wisdom. The first task of practical wisdom is to know our position in the world in order to seek what is truly best. There is no one wiser than Socrates because he is the only one who acknowledges his own ignorance; this kind of knowledge is precisely practical wisdom and the proper meaning of the expression "to know thyself." Socrates fulfills the divine commandment and greeting.

However, the question of what it means “to take care over oneself” (Plato *Alcibiades I* 1955, 127 e) needs additional exploration. This art or knowledge does not aid in augmenting any of our possessions but rather seeks our good and helps make us better (128 d-e). Socrates refers to a kind of knowledge that differs from the other arts; it looks for the good of the human being as a whole. Other arts and sciences aim at a particular good (clothes, shoes, food, health, etc.), but this kind of knowledge pursues the good of human beings in all our dimensions. In other dialogues, that which allows us to distinguish the good from the bad in the quest for happiness is also called “kingly art” (Plato *Euthydemus* 2005, 291 b) or prudence (Plato *Meno* 2005, 88 c-d).

This kind of knowledge, necessary for virtue, is only possible when we try to know ourselves: “If we have that knowledge, we are likely to know what pains to take over ourselves; but if we have it not, we never can” (Plato *Alcibiades I* 1955, 129 a). Here, Socrates and Alcibiades reach the dialogue’s main question, namely, what is a human being in reality? His soul, rather than his body, rules the body: “Then he who enjoins a knowledge of oneself bids us become acquainted with the soul” (Plato *Alcibiades I* 1955, 130 e). The soul, however, can only know itself when she looks into her noblest parts; for Plato, practical knowledge has to do with a disposition in the soul grounded on the contemplation of the divinity we find in ourselves, namely, the ideas of justice, goodness, and beauty, as he points out in other dialogues (*Phaedo* and *Republic*). Plato views practical wisdom’s task as finding what is truly valuable in life and comes through knowing what to do, which is equivalent to knowing our position in the world and acknowledging our proper limits. This is precisely the task of self-knowledge and virtue.

The question of practical wisdom can also be seen in Plato’s political dialogues, especially when he examines the relationship between power and justice in the sophist account. In his dialogue *Gorgias*, we find Socrates arguing against Polus’s view that rhetoric is the main source of power, as follows: If power is good for the one who has it, orators truly have the least power (Plato *Gorgias* 2010, 466 b) because they lack knowledge and thus do not know what is good for themselves and are not able to achieve it. Against common cultural views, Plato tries to develop a different concept of power. Many believe that power consists in having the capacity to do whatever one wants (466 c-d); Plato argues, nevertheless, that such capacity would not be a great power:

For I say, Polus, that the orators and the despots alike have the least power in their cities, as I stated just now; since they do nothing that they wish to do, practically speaking, though they do whatever they think to be best. (Plato *Gorgias* 2010, 466 e)

For Plato, we have power inasmuch as we have the capacity to achieve some good end, something good for our own life, because to do whatever one wants without barriers does not ensure the achievement of any good. Great power necessarily needs knowledge of what is good and bad for the subject who exercises it. We see, therefore, that for Plato practical wisdom has to do more with having the capacity to reach some good end than with the ability to achieve power and dominate others. In fact, great power only flourishes if it is accompanied by knowledge of what is

good for the subject: “What I said was true, when I said it was possible for a man to do what he thinks fit in a city, and yet not have great power and not do what he wishes” (Plato *Gorgias* 2010, 468 e).

Plato distinguishes here between two levels of action: One thing is to do what might be seen as good (the apparent good) and another to do what we really want to achieve (the real good). This distinction between levels of practical knowledge is the foundation of the Platonic concept of power. Socrates makes the distinction between (i) what seems to be good without true knowledge and (ii) what we really want to achieve in our lives, namely, happiness. In order to get what we really want, a kind of knowledge that goes far beyond the ability to persuade others (rhetoric) is needed. In this way, Plato develops a new concept of power – the ability to reach certain goods such that great power is only present when we achieve great benefit for our own lives. In fact, Plato argues that the concept of power is not so simple as dividing it into real and apparent categories (Notomi 2007, pp. 57–61). Power without true knowledge of what is good and bad is totally powerless, and the exercise of power requires the use of intelligence. Nevertheless, it is necessary to use intelligence for the right ends by not just ordering the means for attaining power but also by seeking what is truly best and just.

In the first book of the *Republic*, justice appears as the political community’s main source of order and peace. It argues that all forms of human community need some kind of justice in order to survive; even a band of robbers or assassins needs some order within its ranks. Wherever there is injustice, there is always disorder, whose ultimate consequence is a lack of power (Plato *Republic* 1969, 351 e–352 a). In fact, Plato establishes a close relationship between power, justice, and rationality based on the need for wisdom in order to attain an end. All political community is formed in order to attain certain goods, but it is only possible to achieve those goods if it has knowledge of what is good and proportional. Justice is nothing more than right order and proportion, and it is only achievable through the use of intelligence.

Plato also describes practical wisdom as the art of politics in the sense that it is a rational disposition toward government. In his dialogue the *Statesman*, Plato compares the art of politics with the art of weaving. Both politics and weaving are similar in that they have to find the appropriate measure, and when found, good and beautiful order will flourish in the community. The art of politics necessarily involves practical wisdom, a very peculiar kind of knowledge. It is clear that Plato links power to rationality, but it is a specific kind of rationality. The art of measurement has two important characteristics. On the one hand, it is not an instrumental or utilitarian use of rationality. The art of politics should be based on knowledge and that knowledge consists in the apprehension of true measure and its implantation in society; rationality is therefore subordinate to that ideal measure. In other words, the art of politics does not consist in rational calculation in order to obtain power but rather in the introduction of a very specific order that brings goodness and beauty to all society. Measure is an end in itself. On the other hand, this appropriate measure seems to be objective: “All the arts alike exist and that the greater and the less are measured in relation not only to one another but also to the establishment of the standard of the mean” (Plato *Statesman* 1961g, 284 d).

A clear argument emerges: More and less can only be specified with reference to a measure that should be objective. Without a pattern, it would be impossible to apply these terms to anything. Thus, the art of politics seeks the right measure. Politics cannot be an instrumental art and is not subordinate to anything other than the right measure. This is a very important point for understanding the nature of practical wisdom. As Plato notes repeatedly in his dialogues, this kind of knowledge is different from that of the sciences and arts – it is not directed toward production but rather tries to bring order among a variety of things in pursuit of a good end.

This is precisely one of his conclusions in the dialogue *Philebus*; there, Socrates argues with Philebus about which kind of life is better – one based on pleasure or one based on rationality. He resolves that the best life is a mixture of pleasure and rationality, but, in order to arrive at a good mix, intelligence must set the right proportion. Once this determination is made, life will be ordered and beautiful: “Now the power of the good has taken refuge in the nature of the beautiful; for measure and proportion are everywhere identified with beauty and virtue” (Plato *Philebus* 1925, 64 e). Measure and proportion are presented as sources of the good, and, in this sense, they have specific power. Rationality gives shape to power, not as an exterior element that sets limits negatively but rather as the right order that makes power genuinely effective. Without order, without rationality, it would be impossible to live a beautiful and happy life.

Aristotle’s View: Practical Wisdom as Prudence

Aristotle, considered Plato’s most indisputable disciple (Reale 1985, p. 15), also witnessed Greece’s political decline. In spite of the critical distance that exists between both men in ethical matters, Aristotle ascribed to Socrates’ (and later Plato’s) eudaemonistic position, although he approached reality differently, which has important repercussions for his view on practical wisdom. Latin thinkers translated *phronesis* as *prudentia*, although the meaning they gave to it is quite different from the Aristotelian one since they approach it through the framework of Christian moral theology (Aubenque 1999, pp. 55, 86).

As Jaeger (1923) points out, once Aristotle abandons the theory of ideas, the Platonic synthesis between the ideal of the contemplative life and the ideal of practical or political life began to dissolve, with significant consequences for Aristotle’s understanding of practical wisdom. Although in his conception of the divine Aristotle never ceases to be Platonic (Jaeger 1923, p. 85), the transcendent god moves farther and farther away from the activity of men, and action acquires a kind of moral sense that guides it toward that which is immediately useful and good for man (Aubenque 1999, p. 19). This shift between Platonic and Aristotelian approaches is represented in Raphael’s painting “School of Athens” housed within Vatican City:

The ancient philosophers are painted with Plato and Aristotle at the center, who are turning their heads to look at one another: Plato points upward with the index finger of his right hand, while holding upright in his left hand a copy of the *Timaeus*. Aristotle gestures forward

and downward with his open right hand, while holding flat in his left hand a copy of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. (Arnhart 2016, p. 42)

As a result, for Aristotle, practical wisdom is much earthier and rather removed from the discovery of something divine in ourselves through the contemplation of ideas. Aristotle focuses on a detailed study of the rational soul's virtues. He shows a direct relationship between happiness and virtue (NE I 6) that is present – as Vigo (2007) shows – in the structure of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which starts and finishes with an approach to happiness (Books I and X) and is complemented by a detailed development of virtue (Books II to IX) in the middle. His idea of happiness is in close relationship with the notion of *phronesis* since his definition of virtue gives a central role to a practically wise person's judgments and deliberate decisions – *proairesis* (Vigo 2007, pp. 200, 188).

Besides happiness, this teleological approach to ethics is grounded in a conception of human nature that provides an *ergon* (function) to human life (NE I 7 1097b), i.e., a distinctive and fundamental *telos* (end), which in the case of human beings is reason (NE 1098a). Human excellence resides in rightly fulfilling this function through human activities – *energeia* – in accordance with reason (Sison 2015, p. 242). There are three types of human activity: contemplation (*theōria*), action (*praxis*), and production (*poiēsis*) (NE 1178b 20). Each of these is governed by a distinct form of rational excellence (*arête*): theoretical reason (*sophia*) for contemplation, practical reason (*phronēsis*) for action, and technical reason (*technē*) for production (Murphy 1993, p. 87).

Thus, the first preliminary distinction that should be made is between intellectual and ethical virtues. For Aristotle, there are five intellectual virtues – rational excellences or faculties – all of them related to truth (*aletheia*). Three of them (*episteme*, *nous*, and *sophia*) are related to the theoretical use of reason for knowing necessary and immutable things, and the two remaining (*technē* and *phronesis*) relate to the practical use of reason for dealing with the variable and contingent (NE VI 3 1139b-1145a). Within this realm, *phronesis* refers to actions in the moral sphere, whereas *technē* is concerned with making things – instead of doing – i.e., it has a productive end.

As regards moral virtues, Aristotle goes beyond the four virtues that Plato presents in the *Republic* (IV 247d-445e), which are known as the “cardinal virtues” – temperance (*sophrosyne*), courage (*andreia*), wisdom (*sophia*), and justice (*dikaiosyne*) – to develop a set of moral or character virtues that help one to realize the good. Among others, they include courage (NE III 9-12), temperance (NE III 13-15), liberality (*eleutheria*, NE IV 1-3), magnificence (*megaloprepeia*, NE IV 4-6), magnanimity (*megalopsychia*, NE IV 7-9), justice (NE V), and friendship (*philia*, NE VIII and IX 1-4, 9-12) (Vigo 2007, p. 204).

Thus, practical wisdom – *phronesis* – is an intellectual virtue (NE I 13 1103a 6), not a moral one, which means that, although it is related to moral virtues and since it has action as its object, it is beyond morality (Cooper 1975, p. 1). Rather it is “the capacity to think well for the sake of living well” (Schuchman 1980, p. 30), that is, living an integral life with all it entails (NE 1098a; 1140a 28). In other words, a

conception of a good life, as well as of the prudent men (*phronimos*), is behind the use of practical wisdom. This subjective perspective is present in Aristotle's definition of virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (NE 1107a 1-3).

This definition risks becoming circular since the rational principle for determining virtue is the standard that a "qualified agent" (Hursthouse 1999, p. 28) – the person of practical wisdom, *phronimos* – uses to determine her correct action, but it is the *phronimos* herself who determines the rationality of the principle. In other words, in order to become prudent, one should commit prudent actions, while prudent actions can only be done by one who is already prudent. Den Uyl points out the circular logic here, but it is practical rather than theoretical (1991, p. 64). For practical wisdom, taken as an intellectual virtue directed toward practical action, already presupposes the definition of moral virtue that Aristotle provides. The person of practical wisdom has already developed an appropriately stable moral character – which is why Aristotle posits character coupled with experience as a prerequisite for *phronesis* (NE 1142a).

This point is key to understanding the essence of this excellence; otherwise, it would be nearly impossible to act wisely since "without moral virtue, every component of practical wisdom would have to be exercised *fully* in every particular case; and because the objects of practical living are contingent and ever changing, the absence of moral virtue, even with the presence of practical wisdom, would make it difficult to act expediently in the real world" (Den Uyl 1991, p. 66). That is why "it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue" (NE 1144b 30-31). For Aristotle, practical wisdom and virtue never operate independently (Den Uyl 1991, p. 67). Moreover, "practical wisdom is like a charioteer that guides and a mother that begets all the other virtues (NE 1145a); without it, no genuine virtue exists" (Sison and Hühn 2018, p. 167).

Conclusions

Greek philosophers began thinking about practical wisdom as a way of attaining happiness. Although the historical Socrates' view on practical wisdom is less discernible, there is no doubt that he moved philosophy toward the question of the good life and was mainly interested in how to live a life in accordance with psychic demands. Practical wisdom is, for him, the use of our intelligence to shape and organize our lives. Plato, for his part, explores this view of practical wisdom, trying to develop a new way of education opposed to sophist teaching. For Plato, practical wisdom is not the rational ability to persuade others and dominate them but rather the art of applying the right measure and proportion to human life. The only way to live a happy life is through the introduction of order. Life thus begins to achieve harmony according to the ideas of the good, justice, and beauty. Although Aristotle rejects Plato's theory of ideas, he continues a Platonic line of thought, presenting practical wisdom as prudence (*phronesis*), an intellectual virtue concerned with right order in

human actions. Therefore, although prudence is an intellectual virtue, it can be described as practical rationality – as the use of intelligence that seeks to know how to direct our actions and attain happiness.

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