

Write a critical commentary on the following passage: “This, then, is thought and truth concerned with action. The thought concerned with study, not with action or production, has its good or bad state in being true or false; for truth is the function of whatever thinks. But the function of what thinks about action is truth agreeing with correct desire. The principle of an action - the source of motion, not the goal - is decision; the principle of decision is desire and goal-directed reason. That is why decision requires understanding and thought, and also a state of character; for acting well or badly requires both thought and character.” (VI.2, 1139a27-35).

In this passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between intellectual wisdom (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and suggests that there is a special kind of practical truth which *phronesis* in particular aims at. In this commentary, I will first briefly locate this passage in the context of the wider work, before focussing on two key claims it makes: first, that practical truth depends in an important way on desire; second, that there is a type of understanding specific to decision-making. The first idea is crucial for Aristotle’s argument that *phronesis* requires complete virtue of character, while the second helps him to defend the position that intellectual activity is a part of the highest human good – while each also links to other fundamental concepts in the *Nicomachean Ethics* like the human function (*ergon*) and the nature of the soul.

Book VI marks a transition point in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle moves from discussing the virtues of character to the virtues of thought. Aristotle’s division of the human soul into two parts – a rational part and a non-rational part, with the latter having a component which is capable of listening to reason (I.13, 1102b28-29) – leads naturally to this ordering: having established that the non-rational part is performing its function well when an individual has good character, Aristotle is now ready to explain what is required for the rational part to perform its function well. Earlier in Book VI, he further

**Commented [u1]:** This is a very good introductory sentence for opening your commentary, including both a brief contextualisation and what you take to be the main claim or idea that is being introduced.

It seems there are two possible emphases or points of direction one could take from this passage. One is the concern with practical truth as the function of the practical intellect and *phronesis* as the corresponding virtue. The other discussion or point of interest the passage would allow one to address is the two-part requirement that acting well (~practical truth) requires both thought and character—this would allow one to engage the question of the relation between ethical virtue and *phronesis*. Admittedly, that makes the passage quite complex and possibly not the best candidate for the short answers you are able to give in the exam.

In any case, you do well to integrate both of these discussions, as you announce in the remainder of your introduction.

**Commented [u2]:** Yes, it is worth saying that this is what you will be doing but I think you should be just slightly more precise here, otherwise this remark just isn’t really informative. Make it short, but say something like “locate this passage in the context of A’s discussion of x”.

**Commented [RS3]:** Does he use the word *nous* in both the practical and the theoretical case?

**Commented [u4R3]:** Excellent question. It turns out that in NE, Aristotle uses the term *nous* to describe both the intellect in general but also a particular intellectual and theoretical virtue. We can briefly work through these different usages in the tutorial.

**Commented [u5]:** Good, this is a great way to weave together different themes in the ethics while tying them back to the concerns of the passage you are looking at in detail.

**Commented [u6]:** This is an interesting observation, and I would be curious to hear more about what you think it signifies. Why this particular ordering, why discuss the excellence of the non-rational part of the soul first? It is not crucially important to address this, but I am wondering whether there is anything more to say about this, also in relation to the argument you make here.

divides the rational part, into a subpart focussed on the necessary facts of science and a subpart focussed on deliberation (VI.1, 1138b7-9). The “thought concerned with study” is the former, while the “thought... concerned with action” is the latter. For each part, Aristotle asserts that its function is to seek out truth, since that is the characteristic activity of reason.

**Commented [u7]:** I would add in parenthesis the Greek term (episteme) here. Scientia is obviously the latin translation chosen to represent this term, but just to make sure that you don't have any images of modern science in mind (I know you don't, but for the sake of the overly critical examiner one might just add it).

The second sentence of the passage highlights an important nuance in Aristotle's conception of truth, however. While the function of the intellectual part of the rational soul seems to merely consist in arriving at accurate beliefs, the practical part has a further requirement that its conclusions must “agree... with correct desire”. This requirement might seem superfluous: given Aristotle's emphasis in the passage of how *phronesis* is always about reaching a decision (*prohairesis*) and subsequently taking an action, why should desires come into it at all? As Coope (2012, p146) notes, it is not immediately obvious why the continent person – who takes actions in accordance with reason even though their desires would have them do otherwise – should lack *phronesis*, given that they are doing the same things that a fully virtuous agent would.

**Commented [u8]:** Great, overall the taxonomy and exposition of the structure of the soul and intellect, from their parts to their virtues, is very well done, with sufficient detail while keeping it brief.

**Commented [RS9]:** Arguably it also consists in having understanding of those beliefs

**Commented [u10]:** This part actually again comes in two kinds of virtue that Aristotle differentiates (episteme and nous, and together they make sophia)—as I mentioned above, we can briefly go over these further distinctions. In general, there is no important fault with the statement you make here, though.

Before examining whether Aristotle can justify this dependence of *phronesis* on correct desire, it is worth exploring why he might want to show such a connection exists at all. In Book II, Aristotle defines virtue (*arete*) as “a state which decides... by reference to reason” (II.6, 1107a15), outlining how proper virtue of character depends on *phronesis* – a requirement perhaps made clearest in the discussion of justice and decency in Book V, where he emphasises that careful judgement is needed to arrive at the just outcome in cases where perfect legislation is impossible (1137b14-17). Establishing a dependency in the other direction too, such that *phronesis* relies on complete ethical excellence (*ethike arete*), would allow Aristotle to demonstrate that there is a unity to the virtues: each requires *phronesis*, which in turn requires *ethike arete*, and so the virtues must stay together like a neatly packaged bundle (Coope 2012,

**Commented [u11]:** Good. I think Coope brings out the conflict even more clearly when she asks how a defect in the non-rational part of the soul (failing to be virtuous due to a flawed affective state) could in any way influence the degree of excellence of the rational part of the soul. Putting the conflict this way brings out that Aristotle's claims risk blurring the theoretical distinctions that he spends so much time carving in great detail.

**Commented [u12]:** Good! But give the reader already an indication of \*why\* you think answering this question will be worthwhile with reference to the overall aim of your commentary!

**Commented [u13]:** Yes, and this certainly also relates to his discussion of *phronesis* in the political realm in Book 6 when he differentiates individual *phronesis* and legislative wisdom.

p147). Since possessing the virtues of character consists partly in a disposition to have appropriately fine desires, a quality which merely continent agents lack, Aristotle is able to restrict *phronesis* to only fully virtuous agents by stipulating that it needs the correct desires as well as actions.

Showing that “the function of what thinks about action is truth *agreeing with correct desire*” would be a convenient conclusion, then – but is it a valid one? Aristotle certainly does not give much in the way of argument to support the claim, particularly given that the continent agent’s reasoning leads to the same good actions as the virtuous person’s, and yet apparently only the latter fulfils their function well.

Coope (2012, p157) offers one potential justification: the continent person takes insufficient pleasure in the fineness of doing the right action, meaning they do not desire it as much as they ought to. This means that they have a defect in the functioning of the rational part of their soul where these desires, or wishes (*bouleseis*), are produced, and therefore cannot possess *phronesis*. Seen from this perspective, it is evident why Aristotle wanted the connection between practical truth and correct desire postulated in the passage, as well as how he might account for it through the rational part of the soul’s function in generating appropriate wishes.

Aristotle’s account of *prohairesis* in this passage points to understanding as a necessary component for decision, in addition to virtue and thought, but it is not obvious quite what relation he thinks this bears to the virtue of theoretical understanding (*nous*) discussed later in Book VI, about grasping the principles behind scientific facts (VI.6, 1141a9). At one point, Aristotle implies that there is a close analogy between understanding in the theoretical and the practical contexts (VI.11, 1134a37-b4), with Wiggins (1975, p236) suggesting that the thought might be that *nous* is about extremities: abstract generality in the theoretical sphere; specificity of particulars in the practical sphere. Any close similarity between the two types of understanding appears at odds with Aristotle’s view that practical wisdom

**Commented [u14]:** Good, this might give us the opportunity very briefly to talk about the importance of the doctrine of the unity of the virtues, not only for Aristotle himself, but also for those scholars that have received Aristotle’s thought over the centuries.

**Commented [u15]:** This is a good way to put the basic idea. Obviously we might wonder whether this actually get us to the point where we can see and accept that *phronesis* itself depends on accordance of truth with desire or whether we arrive merely at the idea that correct desires and practical truth must somewhat coincide.

**Commented [u16]:** Just remarking that this is very nice stylistically and dialectically.

**Commented [u17]:** At the end of this paragraph, it is not entirely clear what your position regarding Coope’s proposal is in the end.

requires experience, though. As he himself notes, young prodigies are able to attain impressive heights of scientific knowledge and understanding, but not prudence (NE VI.8, 1142a11-19). It would be strange, if the two types of understanding were fundamentally the same, that they were acquired in such different ways, and about entirely opposite extremes. Why does this matter? As Broadie (2020, p269) observes, Aristotle's overall mission for the *Nicomachean Ethics* is to sketch out his account of human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) based on the *ergon* of exercising rationality in accordance with virtue. If *phronesis* bears no deep relationship with *sophia*, then it seems unlikely that this abstract theorising would be a part of the human function. Aristotle's failure to deliver this connection via *nous*, as attempted in the passage, thus makes it harder for him to convincingly argue that *sophia* is constitutive of *eudaimonia*.

**Commented [u18]:** Good, this strikes me as a convincing worry to both the explanation Wiggins offers and to the underlying idea in Aristotle.

To conclude, this is an important passage both in its own right, as the point where Aristotle clearly sets out his distinction between the theoretical and practical virtues of thought, and as a contributor to Aristotle's ongoing explanation of the connection between ethical virtue, rational thought, and flourishing. While there is a path for Aristotle to satisfactorily defend his first claim that *phronesis* depends on correct desire (and use it to set up his subsequent argument for the unity of the virtues), his suggestion that practical reason involves a kind of understanding analogous to that associated with scientific knowledge is rather more dubious – and this weakness undermines his attempt later in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to show that the exercise of theoretical wisdom is the highest human activity.

**Commented [u19]:** Yes, this is a good critique and brings to the point a pertinent concern with regard to Aristotle's ability meaningfully to make sense of *nous* as something that unifies or at least shows the unifying connection between *phronesis* and *sophia* and hence the relevance of both for *eudaimonia*.

## References

Broadie, Sarah. 2020. 'Practical Truth in Aristotle', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 57, 249-272.

Coope, Ursula. 2012. 'Why does Aristotle Think that Ethical Virtue is Required for Practical Wisdom?', *Phronesis* 57:2, 142–163.

Wiggins, David. 1975. 'Deliberation and Practical Reason', in Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, University of California Press, 221-240.

Rohan,

As you can see from my comments, I think you succeeded at writing a very well-structured commentary on this passage that achieves the things we had previously jointly determined to characterise a strong commentary (contextualisation, accurate exposition and differentiation, and critical perspective brought out in a dialectical discussion). In the second part of the commentary, a little more signposting and guidance would have been beneficial, and the way that you position yourself to Coope's suggestion could have been more explicit and clear. There were only very few and arguably minor inaccuracies that I marked above. The structure of your commentary, discussing two interrelated claims made in the passage above, gives us perhaps two different ways of shortening the commentary and bringing it into a format that is more appropriate for the exam (dropping the discussion of one of the claims or finding a way to discuss their interrelation in a shorter way), which we can discuss in the tutorial. Overall, this is very well-done and shows a very good understanding of the relevant notions in Aristotle as well as good critical distance and creative argumentation.