

## Aristotle on Knowledge and Opinion

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Contemporary philosophers have a tendency to collapse the ancient distinction between knowledge and opinion. This tendency is especially pronounced in moral philosophy. We like to think that theoretical knowledge provides moral principles for our actions, and that practical opinion about facts enables us to apply our principles.

Aristotelian scholars present no exception. They usually argue that theoretical knowledge consists of general propositions concerning our conduct, and that practical knowledge consists of particular propositions regarding our circumstances. Applied ethics takes these general and particular propositions and forms them into practical syllogisms, which conclude in actions performed by obliging agents.<sup>1</sup>

This paper offers a hypothesis counter to the current view. My hypothesis rests on an analysis of how Aristotle conceives of the most fundamental distinctions that underlie the identities and the differences between theoretical and practical knowledge. These distinctions we have for the most part overlooked.

I shall focus my analysis and exegesis on Aristotle's concept of moral knowledge and its relation to opinion about moral matters. If any theory does, moral

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1. Cooper argues, for example, that dialectic provides practical principles for moral theory, and that dialectic thus determines what the ultimate end of our action is. Deliberation determines how to accomplish this end. See John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 66-71.

Irwin agrees with Cooper that dialectic is the way to practical principles, which are those of moral and political science. He goes on to argue that dialectic and deliberation are the same method, and that dialectical argument forms part of practical reasoning. See T. H. Irwin, "First Principles in Aristotle's Ethics," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978): 252-272, esp. 257-259.

theory must have practical value, we are accustomed to think. But we shall see that the Aristotle offers a view other than what might appear so obvious.

Aristotle does suggest in some passages, I concede, that moral theory has practical value.<sup>2</sup> But in

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2. In one passage Aristotle seems to assert that the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself is a work of practical wisdom. But the usual translation of the passage reflects, I submit, our contemporary attitude toward moral knowledge and opinion. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson offer this revision of the Oxford translation:

Since, then, the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue it is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use), we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are produced, as we have said. (EN II.2. 1103b26-31)

With this revision, Ackrill and Urmson thus offer a translation essentially in agreement with the translation of W. D. Ross [Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)].

But, the Greek is ambiguous at two key points in its subordinate clause. The text equally, if not better, supports this translation:

... our present subject (πραγματεία) does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue (ἀρετή) is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our virtue (αὐτῆς) would have been of no use) ...

The term *πραγματεία* is ambiguous. Aristotle himself uses it to mean either a study or a subject of study (see, e.g., *Phys.* II.7. 198a29-31). I also take *αὐτῆς* to refer back not to *πραγματεία* but to *ἀρετή*.

Aristotle would appear in this passage to refer not to the *Ethics* itself but rather to moral virtue, which is the subject of its second book. A more literal translation would be:

Since, then, our present subject is not for the sake of theoretical knowledge, like the others (for we are inquiring not so that we know what virtue is but so that we become good, since otherwise there would be no use for our virtue), we must examine the subject of actions, namely how

some passages of equal, if not greater, significance he holds that moral theory cannot have practical value. He argues famously, for example, that theoretical knowledge can be of value for its own sake only (see *EN X.7*; *EN X.8*. 1178a22-1179a32). But practical knowledge, he also argues, is of value both for itself and for our practice (see, e.g., *EN VI.12*).

I intend to examine Aristotle's concept of the relationship between knowledge and opinion. We shall find that Aristotle conceives of knowledge and opinion in general and in particular of moral knowledge and opinion quite differently than we do. We shall see, too, that for him there can be, paradoxically for us, no applied moral theory.

## I.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle sharply distinguishes the theoretical intellect from the practical. He argues that the theoretical intellect concerns things of one kind, and that the practical intellect concerns things of another kind:

Let us assert that there are two parts of the soul that are rational. The one part is that by which we see the sort of things of which the first principles cannot be otherwise (αἱ ἀρχαὶ μὴ ἐνδέχονται ἄλλως ἔχειν), the other is that by which we see things which can be otherwise (τὰ ἐνδεχόμενα). For with respect to objects different in kind, the parts of the soul answering to each of the two objects naturally differ in kind, since the knowledge belongs to these parts in accordance with some similarity and kinship. (*EN VI.1*, 1139a6-11)<sup>3</sup>

His assumption is that we may distinguish the faculties of our soul by distinguishing their activities and their objects.<sup>4</sup>

we ought to do them, for these are the chief things for generating habits of such and such a kind, as we have said.

3. Unless otherwise noted, the translations are mine.

4. Reeve recognizes that the theoretical and the practical intellect must "study completely different, non-overlapping, things." But he goes on to argue that the theoretical intellect concerns only "the things that do not admit of being otherwise," and that the practical intellect concerns both these things and the things that do "admit of being otherwise." His reasoning is that the scientific intellect properly studies universals, and the calculative intellect particulars, but that the calculative intellect must consider universals as well. He explicitly identifies universals with things which do not change and particulars

Aristotle clearly distinguishes theoretical from practical wisdom in the same way. He argues that theoretical wisdom concerns things apparently divine, and he implies that practical wisdom concerns things human:

That is why they say Anaxagoras and Thales and men of such sort to be theoretically wise (σοφούς) but not practically wise (φρονίμους) when they see them ignorant of that which is in the interest of themselves (τὰ συμφέροντα). They say these men know things which are extraordinary, marvelous, difficult, and daimonic (δαιμόνια), but useless, because they do not seek human goodness (τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἀγαθὰ). (*EN VI.7*. 1141b3-8)

Those who have theoretical wisdom know what has daimonic properties. These things are the heavenly bodies, which cannot be otherwise (see *EN VI.7*, 1141a33-1141b2). These theoreticians lack practical wisdom and knowledge of what is human and especially of what is in their interest. But practical wisdom concerns things about which we deliberate, and these things can be otherwise (see 1141b8-11).

We see, then, that theoretical knowledge for Aristotle is starkly different from practical knowledge because theoretical objects differ significantly from those of practice.

## II.

But Aristotle's distinction between the theoretical and the practical intellect brings to the fore our problem of what practical value moral theory might have. Because it concerns objects quite different than those of practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge would seem to have no concern at all with practical matters.

I submit that theoretical wisdom provides a model for practical wisdom. Wisdom of the theoretical or the practical kind concerns the same concepts but regards them now *sub specie aeternitatis*, so to speak, and now *sub specie humanitatis*. Theoretical wisdom concerns these concepts taken as eternal truths, and practical wisdom takes them as temporal truths.

The primary evidence for my interpretation comes from a neglected passage in the *Posterior*

with things which do change. See C. D. C. Reeve, *The Practices of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 73-74.

*Analytically.* In the passage Aristotle confirms the distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom:

The scientifically knowable (τὸ ἐπιστητόν) and science (ἐπιστήμη) differ from the opinable (τοῦ δοξαστοῦ) and opinion (δόξης), because science is of the universal and through necessity, and the necessary cannot be otherwise (οὐκ ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως ἔχειν). But there are some truths and things that can be otherwise (ἐνδεχόμενα ... ἄλλως ἔχειν). It is therefore clear that science (ἐπιστήμη) is not about them, for what is capable of being otherwise would thus be incapable of being otherwise. But neither is intuition (νοῦς)—I mean, intuition of the first principles for science. (*An. post.* I.33, 88b30-36)

Though he only implies that theoretical intuition does, he clearly argues that science concerns things that cannot be otherwise (also *An. post.* I. 33, 89a6-8 and 9-10).<sup>5</sup>

He accordingly concludes that opinion concerns things that can be otherwise:

Intuition and science and opinion and arguments through these concern truth. So it remains that opinion (δόξαν) is about truth and falsity and that which can be otherwise (ἐνδεχόμενον ἄλλως ἔχειν). (*An. post.* I.33, 88b37-89a3)

I assume that true opinion includes practical wisdom (see *EN VI.5*, 1140b25-28).<sup>6</sup>

More significantly, Aristotle explains in this same passage how theoretical and practical wisdom, despite their dissimilar objects, have a similar structure. We may, he observes, both know and opine immediate and mediated propositions:

The one knowing (ὁ εἰδώς) and the one opining (ὁ δοξάζων) will follow through middle terms (διὰ τῶν μέσων) until they come to immediate propositions (εἰς τὰ ἄμεσα). Thus, if indeed the

former knows, the one opining knows, too. For as there is opinion about the fact (τὸ ὄν), so there is about the caused fact (τὸ διότι). (*An. post.* I.33, 89a13-16)

He describes an inquiry proceeding from awareness of a fact to awareness of a caused fact. For opinion about a caused fact arises through immediate propositions:

One would opine both the fact and the caused fact, if one should opine through immediates. But if not through immediates, one will opine only the fact. (*An. post.* I.33, 89a21-23)

He thus indicates that knowledge and opinion have structures that are very similar. They both have mediated and immediate propositions.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, this similarity prompts Aristotle himself to ask not only how we might know and opine the same thing, but even whether knowledge and opinion might be the same:

How, therefore, is the same thing both opined (δοξάσαι) and known scientifically (ἐπίστασθαι)? And why is not opinion (ἡ δόξα) science (ἐπιστήμη), if someone will hold that all he knows he is able opine? (*An. post.* I.33, 89a11-13)

By asking if they concern the same object, he finds himself bringing into question the very distinction between the theoretical and the practical intellect!

Aristotle, of course, is bound to maintain his distinction between science and opinion:

Or if he thus holds what cannot be otherwise (τὰ μὴ ἐνδεχόμενα ἄλλως ἔχειν) as he holds definitions through which there are demonstrations, he will not opine but he will have science (ἐπιστήσεται). If he holds that there are truths, but not however that they belong together in accordance with their substance (κατ' οὐσίαν) and in accordance with their form (κατὰ τὸ εἶδος), he will opine (δοξάσει) and not truly have science. (*An. post.* I.33, 89a16-21)

5. With a more schematic analysis Barnes agrees. See Jonathan Barnes, *Aristotle: Posterior Analytics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 198.

6. Some readers may balk at the suggestion that practical wisdom might be opinion. But Aristotle does distinguish our intellectual faculties by their objects, as he does all our faculties. And he recognizes only two intellectual objects—that which cannot be otherwise and that which can be otherwise. Practical wisdom would obviously be knowledge if it concerned that which cannot be otherwise. If it does not concern that which can be otherwise, pray tell with what object would it be concerned?

7. Reeve (op.cit., 79) does not consider this passage, unfortunately. He attempts to attribute to Aristotle a hybrid argument of knowledge and opinion. An argument of this chimerical sort, he would argue, constitutes practical wisdom, and it consists in scientific knowledge of universals or first principles and in practical perception of particulars. But Reeve is hardly alone. This position goes back at least as far as Greenwood (see Reeve, op.cit., 74, n.14).

The fact that knowledge and opinion both concern the fact and the caused fact is thus not sufficient to make them the same virtue. The crucial distinction for Aristotle is between facts that cannot be otherwise and facts that can.<sup>8</sup>

I conclude that theoretical wisdom does not furnish only general propositions for a practical syllogism, and practical wisdom particular propositions only. Both theoretical and practical knowledge concern both general and particular propositions. Theoretical knowledge requires both propositions for a scientific syllogism, and practical knowledge requires both propositions for a practical syllogism.

Aristotle admits of no practical syllogism of a mixed variety. A syllogism of this sort would require a middle term concerned with an object that cannot and can be other than it is, and it would issue in a conclusion containing a major term concerned with what cannot be otherwise and a minor term concerned with what can be otherwise.

### III.

But one might object, Does Aristotle not assert that theoretical and practical wisdom have the same object? If so, could not theoretical and prac-

8. At 89a17 I offer a neutral translation of ὑπολαμβάνειν as “to hold.” But Barnes offers a more specific rendering of the term as “to believe.” By doing so, he backs himself into a philosophical corner. He places the difference between knowledge and opinion in our mental attitude and not in its object. We know if and only if we believe that an object is knowable, and we opine if and only if we do not believe that an object is knowable, he explains. Aristotle accordingly seems to him to be liable to a regress unless to opine and to know that an object is knowable are the same. But how can an opinion that a knowable object is knowable amount to knowledge, he rightly asks (Barnes, op.cit., 199-200).

Yet Barnes does recognize that Aristotle uses ὑπολαμβάνειν “to mark out the genus of cognitive attitudes of which understanding and opinion are two species.” He accordingly takes the position that Aristotle does not distinguish knowledge from opinion in these passages, but that he distinguishes two species of belief, which are “knowledge and (let us say) mere opinion.” He thus suggests that Aristotle might better define mere opinion simply as belief which is not knowledge (Barnes, op.cit., 201-202)!

Barnes does agree, however, that, when we know something, we know a subject and its necessary predications. That is, we know what a subject is in itself by its definition or its form. Predication of this kind he refers to as an “I-predication” (see Barnes, op.cit., 200).

tical syllogisms concern the same practical object, namely our actions?

Aristotle does assert that his distinction between knowledge and opinion permits us to see how we can have both theoretical and practical knowledge of the same object. But what he states is that science and opinion concern objects the same not in every way but only in some way:

Opinion and science are not of the same thing in every way. But as both false and true opinion are of the same thing in some manner, so are both science and opinion of the same thing. (*An. post.* I.33, 89a23-25)

He develops this analogy to the object of true and false opinion enough to suggest why these objects cannot be identical:

To have true and false opinion of the same thing as some say leads to choosing among absurdities, both that the one opining falsely would not be opining and others. (*An. post.* I.33, 89a25-28)

He relies again on his practice of distinguishing our virtues by their objects. He implies that science and opinion would be reduced to the one or the other if they have an object entirely the same. For true and false opinion would be the same if they both concerned the same object. That is why someone could not opine falsely. False opinion would have no object of its own.<sup>9</sup>

The sameness of the objects of true and false opinion is merely verbal. True and false opinion concern the same object, but their object has different definitions:

Since “the same” is said in many ways, the sameness is possible in a way and in a way not. For to opine truly that the diagonal is commensurate is odd. But because the diagonal, about which the opinions are, is the same, the opinions are of the same object. But the substance of each according to its definition (κατὰ τὸν λόγον) is not the same. (*An. post.* I.33, 89a28-32)

When opined truly, the diagonal is defined in such a way that it is incommensurate, but the di-

9. Barnes agrees with this point. He asks us to suppose that **a** opines truly that P, and **b** opines falsely that P. If so, what **b** opines could not be P. For what **a** opines is true, but what **b** opines is false (see Barnes, op.cit., 200).

agonal is defined so as to be commensurate when opined falsely.<sup>10</sup>

By analogy, theoretical and practical wisdom also have objects that are verbally the same. For one may conceive of the same object as not capable of being otherwise or as capable of being otherwise:

Similarly, both science and opinion are of the same thing. For the one is of animal in such a way that it cannot not be animal (μη̄ ἐνδέχασθαι μη̄ εἶναι ζῴου), and the other is of animal in such a way that it can (ἐνδέχασθαι) not be animal. For example, if the one is of the very thing that is human (ὅπερ ἀνθρώπου), the other is of human but not of the very thing that is human (μη̄ ὅπερ ἀνθρώπου). That they are of human is the same, but the way that they are is not the same. (*An. post.* I.33, 89a33-37)

The difference between knowable and opinable objects is thus not one of how their substance is defined but of how their ontological status is defined. Humanity has the same defining quality for both theoretical and practical wisdom—animality, in Aristotle's example. But humanity itself has a different metaphysical quality for wisdom of each kind. It cannot be otherwise for theoretical wisdom, but for practical wisdom it can be otherwise.<sup>11</sup>

Though one may both know and opine it, Aristotle adds, one may not have both science and opinion about the same object at the same time:

10. Ross agrees. The true opinion and the false opinion are about the diagonal, but they ascribe different essences to it. See David Ross, *Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 607-608.

Barnes also agrees. He again puts the matter schematically: "the opinion that X is Y and the opinion that X is Z are about the same thing, but what it is to opine that X is Y and what it is to opine that X is Z are not the same" (Barnes, op.cit., 201).

11. Knowledge, Ross explains, would be that man cannot fail to be animal, but opinion that man is, but need not be, animal. The one subject is of what man essentially is, the other of man but not of what he is essentially [see Ross (1949), op.cit., 608].

Barnes (op.cit., 201) offers his wonted schematic analysis: "( $\exists t$ )(at  $t$  **a** understands that a man is just what is an animal & at  $t$  **b** opines that a man is an animal)." Or, even more schematically: let "P" be "men are just what are animals" and "P" be "men are animals." Then, "( $\exists t$ )(at  $t$  **a** understands that P & at  $t$  **b** opines that P)."

It appears from this that it is not possible to opine (δοξάζειν) and at the same time to have science (ἐπίστασθαι) of the same thing. For one would have the notion that at the same time the same thing can be otherwise (τοῦ ἄλλως ἔχειν) and cannot be otherwise (μη̄ ἄλλως), which indeed is not possible. (*An. post.* I.33, 89a38-89b1)

He explains why we cannot exercise both virtues at once:

In the same man it is not thus possible. For he will at the same time have the notion, for example, that a man is the very thing that is animal (ὅπερ ζῴου), for that it is not possible not to be animal was this. And he will also have the notion that man is not the very thing that is animal (μη̄ ὅπερ ζῴου). For that it is possible not to be animal was this. (*An. post.* I.33, 89b3-6)

Note, again, he distinguishes our intellectual virtues and their activities by their objects.

My hypothesis now follows. Theoretical and practical wisdom are parallel virtues, and theoretical wisdom provides a model for practical wisdom. Both theoretical knowledge and practical consist of general and particular propositions, but theoretical and practical knowledge concern concepts of different epistemological and ontological status.

#### IV.

Aristotle observes that different persons can at the same time exercise either theoretical or practical wisdom about the same object. Explicitly, he asserts that different persons may exhibit either virtue toward the same thing:

In different men, it is possible to have each virtue toward the same thing, as has been said. (*An. post.* I.33, 89b2-3)

Different individuals at the same time may, in other words, view differently an object verbally the same.

Now, I would ask: Why may not one person have both science and opinion about the same object at different times? Might we not think of wisdom as one thing that we may view in two ways. When viewed as theoretical, wisdom is useless. Its object is eternal truths, which are irrelevant to

practical matters. But when seen as practical, wisdom is most useful. Its object is temporal truths, which include our humble affairs.

We see, then, that moral theory and moral opinion are for Aristotle not the same, though they might seem to be. Moral knowledge concerns things that do not change, and moral belief things that do change. Aristotle sees the relationship be-

tween theoretical and practical wisdom to be one of a model and its approximation. Theoretical wisdom is knowledge of objects, such as our humanity, viewed as entities that cannot be other than they are. Practical wisdom is opinion about these same objects seen as entities that can be other than they are.<sup>12</sup>

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12. Almost anticipating my conclusion, Dirlmeier remarks that one must have in mind the universal as a paradigm. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate, though he invokes Plato [see Franz Dirlmeier, *Aristoteles: Nikomachische Ethik* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1956), 603]!