CHAPTER TWO

PARTICULAR VIRTUES
IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS
OF ARISTOTLE

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1. Knowing the universal vs. knowing the particular

In Aristotle the universal is the object of art, philosophy and science. Some famous passages in his works say it very clearly. In the Poetics 9, 1451b5–7, he tells us that poetry is more philosophical and more important (philosophōteron kai spoudaioteron) than history, because poetry speaks for the most part about the universal whereas history is about particular events. In the same vein, at the beginning of the Metaphysics Aristotle says that empeiria is about particulars, and only when we have a single universal judgement about similar facts (mia hupolêpsis peri tôn homoiôn) (981a5–7) do we have art. Later, he adds that sophia is about the universal, and when we know the universal we know in a way (pós) everything (982a21–23). In the Nicomachean Ethics as well, when speaking about epistêmê, Aristotle says what is typical of epistêmê is to have an account of the universal and the necessary (peri tôn katholou hupolêpsis kai tôn ex anankês ontôn, 1140b31–32).

On the other hand in the Metaphysics itself Aristotle says that in the field of acting the knowledge of particulars is more important than the mere knowledge of the universal:

It seems that for practical purposes experience is not inferior to art; indeed we see men of experience succeeding more than those who have theory without experience. This is because experience is about particulars, and art is about universals, but actions and events are all concerned with particulars (...). Hence, if a physician has theory (logos) without experience, and knows the universal, but ignores the particular falling under it (to den toutôi kath'hekston), he will often get the therapy wrong; because what is to be treated is above all the particular. (981a12–24)
In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he repeats that “praxis has to do with particulars” (*hê de praxis peri ta kath’hekasta*, 1141b16), and that in practical matters to have mere *empeiria* is better than to know only the universal:

This is also why from time to time, in other matters as well, people who lack universal knowledge, i.e. men of experience, are more effective than others who have it. For instance if a man knows that light meat is easily digested and wholesome, but does not know what kinds of meat are light, he will not produce health; whereas a man who merely knows that chicken meat is light and healthy will be more effective. (1141b16–21)

But the conclusion he draws from this distinction is that practical wisdom should possess both the universal and the particular facts:

practical wisdom is not *only* about universals, it is necessary to know the particulars as well, since it is concerned with action and action has to do with particulars (…) practical wisdom has to do with action, so one must know both, or above all particular facts. (1141b14–16 + 21–22; my emphasis).

Gadamer has described the lasting importance of Aristotle’s conception of *phronêsis* starting from this element. According to him, whereas in *Plato* ethics is about applying a rule to a given case, doing the same as a technician who applies the universal rules of his art, e.g. architecture, to the production of an individual object, Aristotle’s conception of practical wisdom gives much more importance to particulars: there should be a dialogue between universal and particular, and acting is a matter of interpretation, not of applying an universal rule to a given case (Gadamer 1990, 317–329).

Whatever the merits of Gadamer’s interpretation of practical wisdom, one shortcoming of his position is to identify *phronêsis* and practical philosophy. He thinks that the condition of validity of practical reasoning described in the *NE* apply to the *NE* itself. Aristotle’s ethics is practical reasoning, according to him, and not a dry and general reflection about universal moral concepts.

I cannot completely agree on this point. Aristotle knows very well the difference between acting in practice and theorizing about virtuous action, and discusses this problem in a passage in *NE* II:

Since the present study, unlike others, is not about mere theory, for we are not investigating what virtue is in order to know it, but in order to become good, for the reason that otherwise our enquiry will be of no use, it is necessary to enquire about things connected with action, and how to act; as we already said before, actions determine also the quality of our habits (…) Let us agree on the fact that it is better if the entire discourse