CHAPTER EIGHT

PHRONÈSIS.
NOTES ON A CONCEPT OF ARISTOTLE’S ETHICS
(BOOK VI, CHAPTERS 5, 8–13)

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The Greek word *phronēsis* plays a central role in Aristotle’s *Ethics*. It has however at least two meanings, both in general usage and for Aristotle as well. First of all, it is knowledge in a broad sense; in this sense, *phronēsis* in the *Eudemian Ethics* (I.1, 1214a32–33) and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I.6 [4], 1096b24; I.8 [9], 1098b24) is one of the candidates for the *megiston agathon*.¹ The term can in this sense also carry a *genitivus obiectivus*: knowledge is knowledge *of something*; in Plato, for instance, *phronēsis tou agathou* (*Republic* VI, 505b10). This sense of *phronēsis*, however, is not what I shall be discussing here; my focus is rather on the term in so far as it denotes a particular faculty for the orientation of our own and others’ behaviour. It was already used in this sense by Democritus (DK B 2), for example. Nowhere however does Aristotle expressly distinguish these two meanings, and it is rather rare for him to establish a *pollachōs legomenon* in expressions for the concepts of his moral philosophy.

Aristotle treats *phronēsis* in the present sense in Book VI (= Book V of *EE*), more precisely in chapters 5 and 8–13. I shall start here by tracing Aristotle’s line of argument in chapters 5 and 8–9, leaving the Greek term untranslated for the time being. The rest of my discussion will then focus on a critique of Aristotle’s theory of *phronēsis*.

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In his analysis of *phronēsis*, Aristotle starts out from an investigation of what we say about *phronomoi* (cf. *EN*, VI.5, 1140a24 f.). For the *phronimos*, according to Aristotle, it seems characteristic that he is “able to

¹ In the *Topics* (VIII.14, 163b9 f.), the term is indicated in this meaning by the phrase *hē kata philosophian phronēsis*. 
deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself (kalôs bouleusasthai), not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of things conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general” (1140a25–28).

Aristotle points as an indication (sêmeion) of this view of the phronimos that we also use the same term for people who behave in this fashion in particular areas, if they deliberate rightly with regard to a particular but worthy end, in so far as there is no technê for this. Thus the bouleutikos would in general (holôs) be very likely also a phronimos (1140a30–31). Here we are faced with an epagôgê, as Burnet (1900 ad loc.) correctly saw.

Aristotle thus orients his analysis of phronêsis to the process of deliberation. He first establishes that such deliberation excludes everything that cannot possibly be other than it is; deliberation can only bear on what is contingent. He goes on to establish that (obviously within the realm of the contingent) everything is also excluded that is outside the possibilities of action of the person deliberating. The first thing that follows from this is that phronêsis cannot be an epistêmê. For epistêmê precisely deals with a realm in which there is no “either one or the other”. A second consequence is that phronêsis cannot be a technê, as it relates to the realm of action, and action (praxis) and making (poiêsis) are different kinds of thing.2

In this way Aristotle obtains an explanation of phronêsis by way of a process of exclusion: “The remaining alternative, then, is that it is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man” (1140b4–6).

This first result of his investigation is then supported by two further remarks. Firstly, by reference to general opinion: We hold Pericles and his like to be phronimoi, because they are in a position to recognize what is good for themselves and for others (1140b7–10). Secondly, by a rather dubious etymology: we call temperance or level-headedness by the name sôphrosynê because it contains (sôzei) phronêsis (1140b11–13). This is then explained by some observations about the influence of pleasure and pain, i.e. the phenomena with whose influence on our behaviour

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2 The text from têsmen gar to eupraxia telos (1140b6–7) probably goes after the paragraph that closes with poiësôs in line b4; this view has been taken by Rassow, Susemihl, Stewart, Grenwood and Rackham, all following here Muret. On the Aristotelian distinction between praxis and poiësis, cf. Ebert 1976.