Aristotle on Rational Action
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A consideration of the many pages Aristotle devoted to a close and painstaking scrutiny of theoretical reasoning gives rise to regret that he did not also write a Prior and Posterior Analytics on practical reasoning. In sharp contrast to his work on the theoretical syllogism, which is investigated systematically and in great depth, his work on the so-called practical syllogism\(^1\) is unsystematic and unsustained. Yet this work, for all its fragmentariness, has hardly, if at all, been overtaken by subsequent philosophers. Certainly the huge strides taken by logicians in recent decades, in the course of which they have tucked the Prior Analytics into a corner of the lower predicate calculus\(^2\), compare impressively with the occasional shuffling that goes on within the field of practical reasoning\(^3\).

One tempting explanation of this very uneven progress made by logicians is that Aristotle did after all say all there was to be said about practical reasoning, but left substantial gaps in his work on theoretical reasoning. Yet this view prompts the question as to why there is so very much to say about the one kind of reasoning and so very little about the other.

Another explanation, which I think is closer to the mark, is that the entities with which practical reason deals are at once more complex and more elusive than are the entities which are the concern of theoretical reasoning. One consequence of this would be to make practical reasoning more difficult than its theoretical counterpart to symbolise. This is important, because logic is severely restricted so long as it remains unsymbolic. The purpose of this paper is to scrutinise one particular obstacle to the symbolisation of practical reasoning, in the light of Aristotle's own writings on the subject. At the end of

\(^3\) Perhaps the most significant recent contribution to the field is that of G. H. von Wright in Varieties of Goodness (London, 1963), Ch. VIII and in "Practical Inference" Phil. Rev. lxxii (1963).
the scrutiny we shall at least be a little clearer about one of the sticking points in a murky but central area of philosophy.

It might be supposed that in order to determine the structure of practical reasoning it would be sufficient to consider the various examples of it that are scattered about in Aristotle's works. But it is a notorious fact that hardly two of those examples have the same structure, and in certain cases the dissimilarities are more conspicuous than the similarities. Furthermore, when Aristotle states in general terms the structure of practical reasoning, which he does in several places, his general descriptions do not in fact cover all the examples he offers that are apparently intended to fall under those general descriptions.

The wide differences in structure exhibited by the different examples of practical reasoning can easily be shown. Perhaps the most complete piece of reasoning offered by Aristotle is the following – let us call it P.S.I: "I need a covering, a coat is a covering: I need a coat. What I need I ought to make, I need a coat: I must make a coat [ιμάτιον ποιητέον]. And the conclusion I must make a coat is an action [καὶ τὸ συμπέρασμα, τὸ ιμάτιον ποιητέον, πράξεις εἶστιν]". The structure of the premisses in P.S.I contrasts strongly with the structure of the premises in the following argument: P.S.II "I ought to create a good [ποιητέον μοι ἀγαθὸν], a house is a good: straightway I make a house [ποιεῖ οἰκίαν εὑρόμεν]" (De Motu 701 a 16-7).

Furthermore neither of the above arguments has the form of the practical syllogism as that form is described by Aristotle. In De Anima 434 a 15-20 he says of the practical syllogism: "The one premiss or judgment is universal and the other deals with the particular (for the first tells us that such and such a kind of man should do such and such a kind of act, and the second that this is an act of the kind meant, and I am a person of the type indicated)". The premisses of neither P.S.I nor P.S. II answer to this description.

Let us, however, allow that Aristotle recognised in practice if not in theory that the premisses in practical reasoning can exhibit many structures – just as he recognised in practice (but also in theory) that the premisses in theoretical reasoning can exhibit many structures.

*e.g. De Motu 701 a 10-25 (which contains three examples), EN 1147 a 5-10, 25-30.*

*De An. 434 a 15-20, EN 1147 a 25-30.*

*De Motu 701 a 18 ff.*