

Political φρόνησις

ABSTRACT: *The paper discusses the relation of φρόνησις to excellences of character in matters of politics. The so-called civic excellences play a key role in that connection. The various kinds of practical insight shed light to the different positions occupied by ordinary citizens and rulers in the state. Their difference is established also by the cognitive states they are endowed with; excellent rulers have knowledge, whereas excellent ordinary citizens have right opinion. The distinction will be discussed within the context of Aristotle's treatment of knowledge and opinion in An. Post. II.*

KEYWORDS: φρόνησις, civic excellences, expertise, knowledge and right opinion.

Near the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics* (I 2, 1094a26–28) Aristotle tells us that it is the task of political expertise to study the ultimate end of human beings, which is happiness, or well-being (εὐδαιμονία). It is the most sovereign, the most 'architectonic' expertise for it sets out which of the other expertises there needs to be in cities, and what sort of expertise people should acquire, and up to what point. Other expertise such as generalship, household management and rhetoric falls under its direction. It makes use of the other practical expertises, and legislates about what one should do and what things one must abstain from doing. Hence its end will comprise the particular ends of the rest. To mention but one sample, in a well-governed state, military experts are placed under the control of statesmen who have learnt the proper uses to which war should be put. There is a priority concerning the end since even if the good is the same for the individual and the city, the good of the city is greater and more complete thing both to achieve and to preserve. Excellences (ἀρεταί), both in character and thinking, are necessary for a happy life, which is the final good, and for this reason it is a small surprise that they have manifestations in civic life.

As the intellectual virtue concerned with practical matters, φρόνησις, practical insight, is central for the unity of excellences of character.¹ It is not possible to possess excellence in the primary sense without practical insight, nor is it possible to have practical insight without excellence of character (NE 1144b32–3). Its role is linked to the problem of how to follow the rules in the city. The just person is not a automatic follower of rules. It is fairly easy to follow the rules of a given community, and practically any adult can perform it without much thinking. People believe that to have recognised what is just and what is unjust involves no special accomplishment; they assume that it is not hard to understand the issues the laws address (NE 1137a10 ff.). To show it, he takes the example of medicine. In general, we all know what makes for health; it is a matter of honey, wine, hellebore, cautery and surgery. But we have to be a doctor to know how to administer them with a view to producing health, and to whom, and when. To have excellences of character in full we need φρόνησις and vice versa, to have φρόνησις we need excellences of character (NE 1144b32). The excellence of lawfulness is not just a matter of being law-abiding. As Aristotle puts it, due to his intellectualistic position Socrates might have thought that the excellences were prescriptions, although we can only say that they are accompanied with prescriptions. Practical insight is one, and if it is present, all the excellences will be present with it. It has a certain kind of generality since if every excellence of character had a kind of practical insight of its own, we would not be capable of deciding what to do in each situations. Concrete situations may call for the exercise of several excellences of character, but it is one decision that has to be made. Furthermore, if practical insight is a stable state of the soul, like all the excellences of character (NE 1105a33), it has to have all the excellences of character since the lack of a single one would weaken its performance.² Consequently, strictly speaking excellences of character imply one another indirectly because each requires practical insight, which connects them. The uniting factor is φρόνησις.³ Excellences of character do not involve one another in the way we read it in Plato's *Protagoras*. There is no logical dependency between these excellences because unity is provided by an external factor, the practical insight which is an intellectual virtue. Here we can also see that as an intellectual virtue φρόνησις connects the two definitions of human being. As an intellectual virtue it provides the ground for the definition according to which humans are rational animals, and as a virtue guaranteeing the unity of virtues it justifies the

¹ For an overview of the scholarly discussion of the topic, with a particular emphasis on political issues, see Bodéüs (1993. 27–30).

² See Broadie-Rowe (2002. 383).

³ It is important to have in mind, as has been shown by Engberg-Pedersen (1983. 56 with reference also to *Politics* 1253a7–18), that as a uniting factor φρόνησις plays a crucial role in connecting the “altruistic” reasoning and the so-called prudential reasoning which concerns the agent and his personal long-term good.

definition that humans are political animals. On this account practical insight is the virtue which enables us to recognise what is good and useful for us.⁴ There are two questions to be raised. What is the role of practical insight in action and how to understand the relation between practical insight and excellences of character in politics?

As for the first, I do not argue for a thesis of my own. For present purposes, I simply accept – because I find it persuasive – the claim that the role of practical insight is not only to find the most appropriate means to reach the goal set by emotional dispositions. Its main constituents, deliberation (βούλευσις) and decision (προαίρεσις), are not just about finding the best means towards certain goals. Rather, they concern goals and means alike. Although the final goal, happiness or well-being, is not something to be deliberated since it is encoded in us – we have a certain natural drive towards it – the particular goals can be subject to deliberation and thus fall within the authority of practical insight.⁵

The question to be settled now is whether the scheme we have found in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 6 applies to politics as well. To see it, first I shall discuss the so-called civic excellences (πολιτική ἀρετή), which might modify the scheme we have learnt in the ethics, and then I suggest a possible way of relating them to practical insight. The second point involves some general claim about the role of practical insight in politics. Among others, one has to clarify the difference between the practical insight of the ruler and the practical insight of the ordinary citizen.

Excellence has a formative role in the life of a city. Aristotle insists in *Politics* that rulers must have complete excellence in character (1260b17–18). Later on (1277a14–15) he adds that the good ruler has not only a fine character but also practical insight. As a matter of fact, φρόνησις is the only excellence peculiar to the ruler (1277b25–26).⁶ At least, the ruler must possess it in the full sense. In Books 3 and 8 Aristotle claims that civic excellence must be taken into account by those who respect the laws (1280b5–6). However, the law does not make us good and lover of justice; it is nothing but a certain contract.⁷ Excellence must

⁴ See Kamp (1985. 86–87).

⁵ See, e.g., Wiggins (1998³) and Ebert (1995). The former also emphasises (235–236) that the decisive property of the man of practical insight is the ability to select those features that are related to the notion of living well – whose accomplishment is his constant aim – from an infinite number of features of a situation. The latter draws attention to the problem of interpreting practical insight as a moral notion. With reference to NE 1141a27–28, he stresses that Aristotle considered certain non-rational animals as possessing practical insight, but that hardly means that they are considered as capable of acting morally.

⁶ It follows that the good citizen who is not a ruler cannot possess excellence in character in the full sense, the point has been developed in Kraut (2002. 370–71). However, that does not mean that the excellences of the rulers could be opposed to the excellences of the subjects, see 1277b18–20 and Kamp (1985. 204–205).

⁷ συσθήκη (1280b10). Aristotle refers to Lycophron the sophist as someone thinking that laws are a result of contract. He criticises Lycophron's theory by saying that laws conceived of

be cared for in a city worthy of its name. If it were not the case, the city would only be a community for reaching certain goals by fight (συμμαχία). It would be nothing but an *ad hoc* gathering. Furthermore, there would be no difference between this city and a loose alliance of settlements located far away from one another. Nature endows us with the latent capacity for civic excellence and an impulse to live in a community (1253a29–30).⁸ It does not mean that civic excellences are of the same kind. Different citizens have different capacities, just as sailors differ in capacity since one is a rower, one a pilot, one a lookout. For this reason, the most accurate account of the excellence of each citizen will be peculiar to each (1276b20–25).⁹ It is clear that justice is an important excellence here for it qualifies interpersonal relations. The main concern in a true city is that citizens should abstain from being unjust to another fellow-citizen (1280b4–5), which contributes to unity. Due to its interpersonal nature, justice is the most important excellence from the point of view of the city. In ideal circumstances, equality in excellence matters more than noble birth, and those who excel in justice have a greater share in the advantages of the city (1281a7). We might expect that just as excellences in general, civic excellences are acquired through habituation. On criticising the craft-model of excellences, Aristotle asserts that they cannot be taught in the way we learn a craft, as a collection of general rules. As he famously claims, excellence is not a matter of rule-following.¹⁰ On describing the acquisition of civic excellence, however, Aristotle offers a modified version of the thesis. Interestingly enough, a way of acquiring civic excellence leads through the learning of rhythm and harmony (1341a1). Music is capable

as contracts lack the power of making the citizens good and just, see 1280a1–b12. For further consequences of the critique, see Bien (1973/1985. 222–223).

⁸ See Keyt (1991. 125). He argues that Aristotle's theory does not imply that humans live in political community by nature. Instead, political community is an artefact of practical insight. On this interpretation Aristotle's theory comes very close to Hobbes's view who famously claims that the *polis* is a product of art. One might say that it does not rule out that the polis as a certain artefact exists for good. There was no such period in the history of mankind in which political community did not exist. By contrast, Hobbes seems to have accepted a pre-political phase in the history of mankind. This is not to say that there is no change in the history of different forms of political community, since deformations of practical reason may lead to bad political communities such as tyranny. On this, see Kullmann (1991. 99–101) who argues that Aristotle did not accept such a phase.

⁹ See Roberts (2009. 557). She also emphasises that civic excellence is connected to particular political circumstances.

¹⁰ As it is clear in the discussion about practical insight in *NE VI* (e.g., 1142a12–16) where Aristotle points to the significance of experience in acquiring it, which has been thoroughly discussed by Hursthouse (2006) who emphasises the skill-like character of φρόνησις. See also Mulgan (1987. 10) and Surprenant (2012. 223–225). Although it is certainly true that practical insight combines intellectual strength with experience in order to facilitate right decisions, one also has to pay attention to *Politics* 1277b28–29 where we are told that the ruler who has practical insight has knowledge as well, and the two properties are tied to one another. Thus the intellectual side of practical insight is contrasted to the cognitive state of ordinary citizens.

of reforming the character of the soul (1340b10–13). The modification recalls Plato's description of the educational process of the youth in the *Republic*. Different kinds of music give rise to different dispositions of the soul. It also makes a big difference as to which instrument the young is supposed to play; flute and cithera are not advised, the former being all too frivolous anyway (οὐκ ἤθικόν ἀλλὰ ὀργιαστικόν, 1341a21–22). The primary aim of musical education is not to produce professionals. Rather, it aims at cultivating taste and establishing proper dispositions in the soul. Despite the divergence from the thesis on habituation in *Nicomachean Ethics* I, Aristotle insists that civic excellence is not something to be taught by way of direct indoctrination, even if the way of its acquisition is somewhat different from what he suggests in the ethical work. It seems, therefore, that civic excellences do not differ in kind from those excellences which Aristotle discusses in the ethics. Hence their internal relations may not differ from those mentioned in the ethical treatises either. We might get a more complex picture, however, if we examine the context in which practical insight is introduced in the *Politics*.

It seems that excellence can be attributed, not only to individuals, but to cities as well. Courage, justice, practical insight and, perhaps, temperance of the city have the same power and form as the one we find in each person having those characteristics (1323b34 ff.).¹¹ Without them the city cannot function properly. I suppose that the moral qualities of a city are derivative of those in the individual. Derivation may take two forms: we say either, for example, that the city is courageous because the citizens are courageous, or courage is a kind of supervenient quality which comes from good arrangement and proper distribution of tasks. Nothing seems to support the second option. It implies, however, that the analysis in the ethical works applies to communal life as well. This may be the reason why Aristotle does not examine them in detail in the *Politics*. Nevertheless, the common root allows for certain variations which are due to the argumentative context. It is a matter of practical insight to recognise the best laws and those which fit the polities (1289a12). It is not just a technical skill which can be used for various purposes, good or bad alike.¹² Here Aristotle maintains the difference he made in the *Nicomachean Ethics* between practical insight and cunningness (ἀγχινοία/δεινοτήτης) which is a neutral strength of thinking on practical matters.¹³ Furthermore, it is linked to age which leads to a distribution of work in the city. Youth is naturally more vigorous and powerful, whereas

¹¹ In line b34 σωφροσύνη was added by the Greek humanist scholar Adamantios Korais.

¹² In 1253a34 he says that men are born with weapons for excellence in character and practical insight but such weapons can be used for evil purposes lacking excellence in character. One might allow the possibility that excellence in character alone may cause such a situation. For an explanation, see Schüttrumpf (1) (1991), *ad loc.*

¹³ Or, practical insight can be deformed into cleverness in tyranny (Pol. III 7), as has been emphasised by Kamp (1985. 282).

older people are more likely endowed with practical insight (1329a9–15). According to this division, the citizen body is divided into fighting and counselling part.¹⁴ Rulers emerge from this social ambience of the city for they must possess practical insight. Thus the additional information we gain by reading the *Politics* may be twofold. First, as for its cognitive nature, practical insight must be knowledge, not just right opinion. The difference between the two cognitive states will be discussed later. Furthermore, as a consequence, practical insight enables us to see which law is the best and which fits the polity – for laws must be adjusted to polity, not vice versa. Second, it can contribute to the distribution of social roles as well, since its possession qualifies people to take part in the life of the city in a specific way.

Now it seems that the function of practical insight is very much tied to the exercise of civic (πολιτική) expertise, and as a result, to the exercise of political power.¹⁵ Ruling requires practical insight for excellent performance. The intimate link between them has been described in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 6. In a typically Aristotelian manner we are told (1141b23–24) that practical insight and civic expertise are the same state (ἕξις), although their being is different, which may mean that they are different manifestations of the same capacity.¹⁶ At this point, it has not been settled yet whether they are partly or entirely different from one another. In so far as the disposition concerns the city, the architectonic form of practical insight is legislative expertise with the task of discovering and establishing the best laws in the society in question (NE 1141b25), whereas at the level of individuals it has the common name ‘civic expertise’ and is concerned with action and deliberation.¹⁷ Later he adds that it also has a kind called judicial (δικαστική) expertise (1141b34) which must have something to do with practice in the courts.¹⁸ Architectonic and civic forms of practical insight must be connected for the following reason. The decree by which the city is managed, is something to be acted upon, as what comes last in the process which includes both deliberation and legislation. The decree is issued by way of a legislative procedure which involves practical insight. We can observe that Aristotle starts his argument from the observation of common conceptions. In everyday usage,

¹⁴ 1329a31: ὀπλητικόν... βουλευτικόν.

¹⁵ I think πολιτική must be supplemented with τέχνη (expertise), not with ἀρετή (excellence), see Broadie-Rowe (2002. 183, 373).

¹⁶ This is controversial, Ebert thinks (1995. 169) that they are the same state, and their difference is nominal only. Difference in being might involve difference in definition, see Broadie-Rowe (2002. 373–4).

¹⁷ This is related to concrete political action which differs from legislation, as has been emphasized by Bien (1973/1985. 138).

¹⁸ In 1141b30–34 Aristotle enumerates the different kinds of practical insight conceived of as “caring about one’s own interest” (contrasted with the involvement in political matters), which are household management, legislative and civic expertise, the latter being divided into deliberative and legislative expertises. The classification interlocks with the division of architectonic form of practical insight in an interesting way, an issue I cannot discuss here.

practical insight is the ability of the person to take care of himself as an individual (1141b30). By way of expansion, which Aristotle thinks advisable, it relates to household management as well. The relation between the two main forms of practical insight is not quite clear, but so much may be said that civic expertise is not an implementation of rules laid down by the architectonic form.¹⁹ We cannot rule out that even if the architectonic form is superior, it is originated in the person's care for himself.²⁰ The comparison between judicial and deliberative oratory in the *Rhetoric* may also support the claim.²¹ There Aristotle says that speaking in the assembly is prior to legal debates because in political debates it is useless to speak outside the subject. For this reason deliberative oratory leaves less scope for manipulation than judicial speech. On his view, political argumentation is linked to public deliberation in the course of which each member of the audience has to decide about something familiar to him. This is not the case in the courts where the jury decides about issues concerning other people. Thus political debates may provide a better condition for rational persuasion since they concern issues that are important to each citizen as citizen. As a consequence, citizens consider the problems discussed as their own and they try to get as much and thorough information about it as possible.

We have seen that political expertise and practical insight arise from the same state of the soul, although practical insight has manifestations that do not belong to the sphere of polity. Among the political manifestations of practical insight the most important are the recognition of the best law and the one which fits best the ideal polity, and the involvement in the legislative process. It does not mean that some manifestations remain within the confines of private life. We have also seen that it is knowledge which can be contrasted with right opinion; rulers have knowledge. By contrast, the good citizen does not need practical insight, but only right opinion (1277b28–29).²² As he occupies a lower office, his decisions are of a limited range and weight, and can be overseen by the ruler having practical insight. Aristotle does not claim, and we do not have to assume, that φρόνησις amounts to an abstract, theoretical knowledge.²³

¹⁹ See Broadie-Rowe (2002, 373).

²⁰ This is a well-known method of Aristotle, see his discussion of friendship in *NE* Book 9. Famously, he derives friendship from self-love.

²¹ *Rhetoric* 1354b22–1355a1. I owe this point to Miklós Könczöl.

²² Schütrumpf (2) (1991, 433–434) discusses the Platonic origin of the distinction but does not examine the question of the content of these cognitive states within the context of the Aristotelian distinction in *An. Post.* II. I will not deny, of course, that Aristotle was aware of Plato's distinctions. I shall only try to put it into an Aristotelian context. Surprenant (2012, 224) explains the passage by saying that “a citizen is able to display phronesis at the point when he becomes a ruler. If and when he ceases to be a ruler, his judgment, which was formerly considered to be phronesis, is no longer knowledge but opinion.” He thus seems to link the possession of practical insight to social status. It is not clear whether difference in status implies difference in content as well.

²³ As has been emphasised convincingly by Bodéüs (1993, 34–37).

There remains to examine the character of the difference between the two cognitive states. How to distinguish between knowledge and true opinion in this context? The thesis sounds almost like a Platonic distinction. It may be clear that, as an excellence of the thinking faculty of the soul, practical insight must not only be a fine exercise of thinking on practical matters, but also has to possess (or has to have access to) a specific content.²⁴ In order to be knowledge, then, practical insight must have propositional content. We have to bear in mind also that practical insight is knowledge about particulars as well (1142a15). It implies that the content may not be made up of universal statements, or, to put it with more reservation, it may not be made up of universal statements exclusively. Thus the distinction between knowledge and true opinion is not to be equated with the distinction between universal and particular statements. What is the rationale for setting apart the two cognitive states? My suggestion is that the difference might not amount to the difference between a true statement of fact and a true statement of fact accompanied with a right causal explanation. It is a much discussed difference between a *hoti*- and a *dia ti*-type of propositions. Aristotle discusses it at length in *Posterior Analytics*.²⁵ There, in Book II, he compares opinion with knowledge. First, knowledge is universal and acquired by necessary premises. Opinion is a consequence from premises that express contingency (88b30–89a2). If the difference mentioned in the *Politics* were of this kind, however, then we run into a serious difficulty. How can the rulers have necessary knowledge about matters concerning the polis? The rulers' knowledge must be practical knowledge which is about contingent things.²⁶ The crucial component of practical insight, deliberation, rests on the very possibility of things' being otherwise. The second option for distinguishing opinion and knowledge is that right opinion is about the fact only (89a22–23). Aristotle claims that if someone thinks that the propositions are true but his thought does not follow from the nature of the subject-matter, he will have opinion and not knowledge.²⁷ In this way, opinion is both of the fact and of the reason. Opinion

²⁴ The distinction between possessing and having access to certain content may suggest that the exact status of the intellectual excellences might be vague. We may say either that practical insight is a sub-faculty on its own, and has its own content, or the thinking faculty works differently in different situations (which fit the threefold division of sciences) and has a unitary content of different kinds propositions. At this point I do not see clear evidence for any of the options.

²⁵ See 78a22, 79a23, 88b30–89b6.

²⁶ The primary example of someone having practical insight is Pericles (NE 1140b10) whose excellence was manifest, not in possessing universal knowledge, but in administering the affairs of the state. Aubenque (1963, 54–56) also draws attention to the fact that Aristotle chose a politician as an example, which may be due to his insistence on the supreme position of political knowledge as well.

²⁷ If opinion rests on the immediate premises, on premises that are not derived by correct reasoning from necessary premises, it can be both about fact and about reason. For an analysis of the passage (89a3–18), see Ross (1949/1965, 607).

can be of fact only if it follows from immediate premises. Thus we have two possibilities to separate the cognitive state of the rulers from that of the subjects. First, unlike good rulers, then, good citizens know the fact but cannot provide causal explanation for that. On the other hand, subjects can opine on reasons but in doing so they do not exploit the nature of the subject-matter.²⁸ The latter option may involve that they do not rely on the necessary, definitional properties of the subject-matter. Thus the knowledge of the rulers can be based on necessary premises but they do not express the necessity of events since events are not necessitated in the practical world. Rather, the premises express the necessary presence of certain properties.²⁹ It is important to realise that such a distinction is missing from the analysis of practical insight in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The reason for the omission is not quite clear and I cannot pretend to have a persuasive answer at this point.³⁰

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²⁸ If this is the case it seems that the knowledge of the ruler contains elements that are qualitatively new compared to the information of other citizens. It may imply that ordinary citizens cannot compensate for their individual deficiencies by gathering together and combining their faulty skills. Aristotle discusses the matter in III 11, and seems to leave it open. For an analysis of the issue, see Kraut (2002. 402–403, 416) and Miller who also shows the paradox coming from the assumption that kingship can be constitution (1995. 234–237). If in the best constitution civic excellence is the same as excellence of character and polis in which every citizen exercises excellences of character is better than one in which only a single person exercises it and, furthermore, in a kingship only one person exercises civic excellence, then kingship is not the best constitution.

²⁹ Practical insight does involve universal knowledge (NE 1143b2–5: universals are reached from the particulars, and we reach them by means of induction, see Abizadeh (2002)) which led Broadie (1991. 256) to conclude that practical insight mirrors scientific understanding: both conclude by affirming true what was so far assumed as true, and practical insight grasps the principles whereby a given end should be made real. This end is a universal realisable differently in different situations.

³⁰ I owe much to the audience of the workshop for criticism and suggestions, and especially to Miklós Könczöl for his written comments which contained many useful remarks, some of them incorporated in the final version of my paper. All failures are my responsibility, however.

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