

The Ethical Dimension of Practical Wisdom

KAROLINA ROZMARYNOWSKA

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University. Faculty of Christian Philosophy
Institute of Philosophy. Wóycickiego 1/3. 01-938 Warsaw. Poland
karolina.rozmarynowska@gmail.com

RECEIVED: 13-05-2014 • ACCEPTED: 25-09-2014

ABSTRACT: The paper is a reflection on the role of practical wisdom in ethics. By explaining and trying to understand the essence of practical wisdom, the author has endeavoured to determine whether it can be treated as a central ethical category, and if so, then why. In these analyses, author has referred to the concept of Aristotle, universally acknowledged as the classical one. Characterizing and describing that concept, she tries to answer three questions: 1) What is practical wisdom? 2) What function does it perform in ethics? 3) What is the relationship between practical wisdom and other ethical categories? The article is divided into four parts. Each of them concerns different aspects of the analysis of practical wisdom. As a result, the author has come to several important conclusions: Practical wisdom 1) enables appropriate action, i.e. success in action; 2) refers not only to the means-to-ends relationship, but refers to the end itself; 3) is imperative, because it tells what to do; 4) referring to the unusual situation, it allows to understand that every general principle is limited; 5) it is the intellectual ability to recognize how to achieve happiness.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle – ethics – practical wisdom.

0. Introduction

The following paper is a reflection on the role of practical wisdom in ethics. By explaining and trying to understand the essence of practical wisdom, I have endeavoured to determine whether it can be treated as a central ethical category, and if so, then why. In my analyses, I have referred to

the concept of Aristotle, universally acknowledged as the classical one, whose manifest advantages include emphasis on *eudaimonia* and the teleological interpretation of man's practical activity. Characterizing and describing that concept, I will try to look at practical wisdom as a category related to the process of deliberation and rendering practical judgments, thus combining reason, virtues, and praxis. To accomplish this task, I will proceed through stages reflected in the four parts of the article, each devoted to a different aspect of the description and analysis of practical wisdom. Beginning my deliberations with a discussion of the place of practical wisdom in Aristotelian ethics, I will then examine the essence and object of practical wisdom. In the next stage, I will identify the constitutive elements of practical wisdom. This way, through the first three parts I will explore the Aristotelian concept in order to collect complete data on practical wisdom and its related categories, and to sort out the multiple threads and layers of Aristotle's discussion, contained in particular in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Magna Moralia*. The results of this preparatory work will provide the basis for my conclusions on the role of practical wisdom in ethics, presented in the last part. Taking Aristotle's view of practical wisdom as a set of assumptions, I will try to show how practical wisdom plays an important role in ethics, and to explain what this role in fact consists in. I will end the paper with the key conclusions of my analysis to substantiate the claim that practical wisdom may be treated as a central ethical category.

1. The place of practical wisdom in Aristotelian ethics

When considering practical wisdom and its role in ethics, it is necessary to identify the place it occupies among other human abilities. Using Aristotle's analyses, we may notice that it is the virtue of the rational part of the soul. The Stagirite explains that "there are two parts of the soul (...) which grasp a rational principle – one by which we contemplate the kind of things whose originative causes are invariable, and one by which we contemplate variable things" (Aristotle 2009, 1139a). The first corresponds to the ability to contemplate things scientifically, the other to the ability to reason. Reasoning means simply deliberating on that which is variable.¹ In practical in-

¹ That which is variable may be identified with the sphere of human actions, or, more precisely, with future events which are the result of man's choices. Variability results

tellec, truth means correspondence with right desire, based on true judgement which is the result of deliberation. Thinking, if it is practical, is related to deliberate conduct; the end is good action, and this is the object of desire. In theoretical thinking, on the other hand, the good is truth, and the bad is falsity. Thus, the work of both types of intellect is truth, and the state of character which allows one to learn the truth is the virtue of both. The capacity for scientific understanding includes scientific knowledge which is concerned with eternal and necessary objects; intuitive thinking, related to the highest principles; and theoretical wisdom which, combining knowledge and intuition, is the ability to grasp that which results from the highest principles. The capacity for reasoning is, in turn, put into effect by reason, or practical wisdom (*φρόνησις*) (cf. Aristotle 2009, 1139a-1141b).

It results from the fact that practical wisdom is a virtue of the rational part of the soul that it is a certain kind of thinking. It should be clearly distinguished, however, from theoretical thinking. Even though in both cases we talk about thinking or knowledge, we cannot, as has been pointed out by Daniel Devereux (see Devereux 1986, 483), treat them as two kinds of the same category. They differ both in their aim, method and object. The object of theoretical thinking is invariable things, or things which are of necessity and which are eternal, and the highest principles, while practical wisdom refers to variable things, and is thus related to action. The function of theoretical reason is cognitive, as it deals with affirmations and negations, while practical wisdom is concerned with action, i.e. pursuit and avoidance. Practical wisdom is acquired on account of acting, or, to be more exact, for the sake of success in action.

That is why practical wisdom is not the same as wisdom, for the latter is the ability to demonstrate that which is invariable. Practical wisdom, on the other hand, is concerned with that which is variable.² Unlike wisdom, it refers to categories which are relative. Practical wisdom determines what is expedient, and Aristotle explains that “things expedient (...) do change,

from free will, i.e. the fact that man determines his actions by making choices concerning what can be made or done. Free will and choice are connected to deliberation, and the object of deliberation is not that which is permanent or contingent, but that which we can do, that is, our actions (see Stawell 1904, 472-473).

² Therefore, Aristotle concludes that practical wisdom is “inferior” to theoretical wisdom (philosophy). Philosophy is concerned with things that are eternal and divine, while (practical) wisdom – with things that undergo change, and is therefore inferior (cf. Aristotle 1915a, 1197a-1197b).

and a given thing is expedient now, but not tomorrow, to this man but not to that, and is expedient in this way, but not in that way” (Aristotle 1915a, 1197a). It thus depends on a number of factors which represent the circumstances in which an action is performed. There is, however, an important interdependence between practical and theoretical wisdom (or philosophy³): “... [practical] wisdom is, as it were, a kind of steward of philosophy, and is procuring leisure for it and for the doing of its work, by subduing the passions and keeping them in order” (Aristotle 1915a, 1198b) . Thus, though practical wisdom does not rule over philosophy, or theoretical wisdom, it performs an important auxiliary function. Without practical wisdom, philosophy could not be put into practice.

An even closer relationship exists between practical wisdom and good counsel (*εὐβουλία*). Both deal with “matters of action which concern choice and avoidance”. While good counsel is simply a virtue, or a measure of what is right, practical wisdom also includes imagination and intuition. The difference between the two results from the fact that good counsel is a virtue of that part of the soul which “in a way” partakes in reason, and practical wisdom – of the rational part “in the proper sense”. Good counsel is related to reason in that it is connected to that part of the soul which, being a capacity for desire, is submitted to reason, while practical wisdom in itself is the capacity for reasoning.

2. The essence and object of practical wisdom

In accordance with the definition provided by Aristotle, “practical wisdom is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate”. It is therefore “good deliberation” whose object is that which “is capable of being otherwise”, or an aim which can be obtained through action. Practical wisdom, by the very fact that it is concerned with a specific action in specific circumstances, requires recognition of the particulars. A practically wise person thus judges well what should be done in a particular situation. To that end, he needs both knowledge, or the understanding of

³ In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes “practical wisdom” from “philosophical wisdom”; in *Magna Moralia* W. D. Ross renders these terms as “wisdom” and “philosophy”, respectively.

that which is general, and experience, or knowledge of the particular.⁴ Practical wisdom, the Stagirite explains, is a kind of sense (“perception”) which is the result of knowledge and experience. Knowledge is concerned with moral principles, while experience provides us with knowledge of that which is particular, referring both to specific individuals and to certain types of situations and to appropriate choices, behaviours and attitudes. In a way, it is therefore a general kind of knowledge – knowledge of facts which is founded on experience, and which provides guidelines for specific action (Devereux 1986, 489, 491, 492).

Practical wisdom understood by Aristotle as good deliberation consists in contemplating and reasoning, and is concerned with “things just and noble and good for man”. Practical reasoning takes the form of syllogism in which the major premise is the general principle, i.e. refers to that which the agent desires (that which is good⁵), the minor premise refers to the manner in which the major premise can be achieved or its necessary pre-conditions, and the conclusion is the action which puts that general principle into operation. The right way of applying general knowledge to a particular situation requires good deliberation and experience. Deliberation is good when it leads to achieving the right ends with the deployment of the right means. The latter task, i.e. the choice of right means, is the work of practical wisdom, as it allows one to consider “means to achieve happiness”, while choosing the right end is the function of moral virtue.⁶ That statement emphasizes the complementariness of both virtues and the fundamental role they play in moral action. Aristotle expresses that saying: “the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtue; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means” (Aristotle 2009, 1144a). The crite-

⁴ Daniel Devereux explains that “knowledge of particulars (...) could be understood as knowledge of the specific types of action appropriate for specific types of situation: «situations of this type call for such and such action». Or, it could be understood as knowledge of individual acts and circumstances: «this situation I find myself in calls for this particular response»” (Devereux 1986, 485).

⁵ Aristotle identifies these two categories with one another: that which is good is the object of desire, and the object of desire is that which is good (see Aristotle 2014, 1072a).

⁶ That conviction differs from the view of Hume who claimed that the aim is the result of feelings, and the reason is only able to calculate what means should be deployed to achieve it.

tion of what is right or appropriate results, of course, from anthropological premises, that is, from Aristotle's view of human nature and the assumption that any action is teleological in nature, and the ultimate end of man's life is happiness, understood as "the active life of the element that has a rational principle".

The above-mentioned complementariness of moral virtue and practical wisdom consists in that by working together, they make actions we perform both good and right. The goodness of an action depends on its intentions. An action is referred to as "good" in view of its aim. The criterion here is moral virtue, which is a state of character and which determines our desiring that which is good and expedient. Moral virtue, like Kant's good will, consists not only in acting in accordance with what is right, but first of all – for the sake of what is right. The excellence of our character thus refers to the subjective, and not the objective dimension of human actions and requires something we might call a desire for good.

Practical wisdom, in turn, makes our actions right. The rightness of an action depends on the way we act, on the right choice of means we deploy to achieve our end. Thus, moral virtue makes our actions morally good, while practical wisdom gives our actions the right form, making us choose the most appropriate course of action. Such internal relationship means that "without wisdom, excellence of character would be like a man groping in the dark and not knowing where to go; without the desires of an excellent character, wisdom would have nothing to do" (Urmson 1988, 84).

To sum up this part, we may conclude that practical wisdom combines three stages of action: desire, choice and the act itself. Desire deals with the end, and therefore it is right when it is in accordance with moral virtue. A desire is right if man desires something that is good and expedient for him, and for that he needs a permanent disposition, or a state of character which consists in an inclination to desire and do good. Moral abilities, or virtues, are thus necessary, for they allow us to desire that which is right. i.e. good, noble and expedient. The next stage is choice, which is "desire and reasoning". It includes recognition of alternative choices, ends and goods, and judging them from the point of view of the ultimate end, preceded by deliberation. Deliberation, in turn, consists in contemplation and reasoning; it is rational, and its object are "things that are in our power and can be done". Choice refers to choosing "one thing and not another", and thus aims at determining what action should be taken in a particular situation. It refers to means that need to be deployed in order to achieve a desired end.

Thus, deliberation is an attempt at determining how a particular goal is to be achieved, or what course of action will most conveniently and surely bring the expected result. It involves examination of why it is better to do one thing and not another, and thus includes substantiation of the choice of a particular course of action. It mostly deals with establishing a relationship between an action and the aim, determining which action will be the most expedient and why. The result of deliberation becomes the object of choice. We decide about means and the way they are to be deployed, and then actually deploy them. The last stage, therefore, consists in acting on the choice we have made. Practically wise people are not only able to carry out a correct reasoning concerning a good end, but also act in accordance with that reasoning. Aristotle refers to practical wisdom as “a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man”. The object of practical wisdom is not only the right judgment of the situation, but first of all “good action”. Wise action is therefore both good and right, and requires both good intentions and expedient results. Therefore, judgments on which a practically wise person acts may not be “destroyed and perverted by pleasant and painful objects”. Aristotle thus argues that temperance, or an appropriately formed character which allows man to control his emotions and not be carried away by desires is a necessary element of practical wisdom. He can judge what is good and act upon that judgment, putting his right conviction into practice (“abide by the result of his calculations”). Thus, desire and deliberation are inseparable aspects of right action: “There can be no choice without both a desire for an end and a reasoning about how to achieve it” (Urmson 1988, 80).

3. Constitutive elements of practical wisdom

Having now discussed the object of practical wisdom, we may want to ask what allows the agent to choose the right means. What does that ability consist in? We may assume it is founded on certain knowledge, or awareness of what we could refer to as moral rules of conduct. Aristotle’s distinction between practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom does not allow us, however, to consider the former a theoretical type of knowledge, one that says “I know that”. What is that ability, then? It appears that those interpretations of Aristotle’s view of practical wisdom are more accurate which connect it with perceptual capacity, or that type of knowledge

which allows one to perceive what should be done in a particular situation. It consists in the ability to put into effect the idea of a good, happy life, by making specific choices about what should be done here and now, in a particular situation (Hursthouse 2006, 286–287).

How can such practical wisdom be developed? What skills does it require? In trying to answer these questions, we may start by citing Aristotle, who says:

To [*practical reason*] belongs right decision, right judgement as to what is good and bad and all in life that is to be chosen and avoided, noble use of all the goods that belong to us. Correctness in social intercourse, the grasping of the right moment, the sagacious use of word and deed, the possession of experience of all that is useful. Memory, experience, tact, good judgement, sagacity – each of these either arises from [*practical reason*] or accompanies it. Or possibly some of them are, as it were, subsidiary causes of [*practical reason*] (such as experience and memory), while others are, as it were, parts of it, e.g. good judgement and sagacity.⁷ (Aristotle 1915b, 1250a)

Aristotle thus provides a list of skills and traits which constitute practical wisdom. Experience appears to have a special place among them: “Aristotle says that experience of life is necessary for the development of moral wisdom” (Demos 1961, 156). Practical wisdom is acquired by learning from one’s mistakes and those of others, and by watching others succeed, i.e. employ efficient methods in their actions. Learning by experience is not, however, aimed at developing habitual behaviours. Experience will only be useful if we understand the relationship which occurs in a particular situation between the effects of our actions and the methods we have deployed. Learning from one’s own experience and that of others thus requires reflection, deliberation on individual elements of particular situations and the relationships that exist between them. Furthermore, in order to learn from experience, one has to adopt an attitude which prevents him from forgetting his mistakes and repeating them, or which at least makes him unwilling to repeat them. Such attitude is generally related to desiring and pursuing good, which implies, among other things, regretting one’s mistakes.

⁷ In the quoted passage, the term rendered by Ross as “prudence” has been replaced with “practical reason” in accordance with the Polish translation of *On Virtues and Vices*.

The object of practical wisdom is to find a good solution for difficult dilemmas, or such situations in which there are several alternative ways to proceed, from which an inexperienced man finds it hard to choose the right one (see Hursthouse 2006, 289; Polansky 2000, 325).⁸ That which makes one capable of judging correctly in untypical situations is discernment. It enables one to solve difficult dilemmas involving a conflict of virtues, e.g. between kindness and honesty. Such conflict results from the fact that the requirements of both virtues substantiate opposite behaviours. On the one hand, there are reasons for which one should tell a lie, on the other – it appears to be requisite to tell the cruel truth. Such dilemma can only be solved if the virtues are interpreted correctly. *Phronimos* is aware of the fact that in some situations, kindness consists precisely in telling the cruel truth, and that acting with discretion or passing over certain matters in silence is not always the same as dishonesty (cf. Hursthouse 2006, 290–292). *Phronimos* differs from a virtuous but inexperienced person in that he does not perceive virtues from the perspective of conventional generalizations, following acquired, drilled, schematic ways. In order to recognize a conflict between virtues and find the correct solution, or recognize where an exception is appropriate, one must possess all virtues and “have an overall conception of how each of the various virtues do fit together with one another to make up the final end of life, *eudaimonia*” (Bostock 2006, 88). It is only then that the development of a more sophisticated understanding which comes with practical wisdom will be possible.

Another constitutive element of practical wisdom is the ability to get the situation right. It is not possible to act right without understanding the situation in which we find ourselves, without being aware of it in minute detail. That is why general statements do not provide sufficient guidance, as they do not include those details which are of key importance for our actions to be successful. To get the situation right, one must “judge rightly all the complexities of concrete situation” (Urmson 1988, 82).

Right judgement is the work of comprehension, which, Aristotle explains, refers to “things one may have doubts about”. Comprehension, as an intellectual capacity, comes not only from experience, but is also the result of learning. Man learns, for instance, in what circumstances it is advisable to be suspicious and mistrustful, what people most often lie about, who can and who cannot be relied on. He learns that a different account is most of-

⁸ Polansky defines practical wisdom as a calculative and problem-solving capacity.

ten rendered by each person participating in an event. He thus becomes suspicious about the opinions and accounts of others, which forces him to ask appropriate questions about the reliability of the persons he listens to (cf. Hursthouse 2006, 296).

This is also related to perceptiveness, which is a condition of passing correct judgments. It supplies one with practical knowledge of people, and is necessary to recognize and understand differences between them. It is related, among other things, to the ability to correctly interpret emotional states, allowing one to judge whether a particular expression he observes in another person corresponds to the emotions it is supposed to represent, or whether it is an attempt at concealing that person's true feelings. In order to develop that capacity, apart from participating in social intercourse one also needs memory, imagination, and exchange of experience. In the broader sense, perceptiveness refers to understanding the world around us: the circumstances of life and the social reality, and the ability to perceive a hierarchy of goods. Understood that way, perceptiveness is constitutive for practical wisdom, as it is an element of getting the situation right, of understanding the circumstances in which I find myself (see Hursthouse 2006, 299). Even if there are things I cannot change, by being aware of them I may, through deliberation and reflection, change my attitude towards them.

Another essential element of practical knowledge is cleverness, which is the ability to identify the most effective means leading to a desired end. Interestingly, it is an ability which *phronimos* has in common with a vile, unscrupulous person. Just like a capable crook, a practically wise person must be able to deliberate well (see Hursthouse 2006, 298). Cleverness, understood as a certain type of "intelligence without any sense of the good" is not the same as practical wisdom, however (cf. Demos 1961, 155). The difference between them results from the fact that in the case of practical wisdom, the criterion in choosing means leading to an end is not concerned merely with their effectiveness. It is not simply about choosing those actions which are the most effective. Deliberations concerned with the choice of right means also include moral reflection. Practical reason cannot be identified with instrumental reason. Practical knowledge does not consist in simple calculation, and the object of reasoning is not merely the relationship between the aim and the means. The choice of the right way to proceed implies, among other things, a reflection on the side effects. This results from the fact that while achieving one's goal with the most effective

means, one may at the same time cause damage elsewhere. Therefore, practical wisdom sometimes calls for rejecting even such means as are the only possible way of achieving a desired end. Consequently, the reasoning which reflects practical wisdom should take into account a broad perspective; it must contain the element of imagination and the ability to foresee, to create possible scenarios (modelled on cause and effect chains). It is the ability to anticipate the consequences (not only the immediate ones) of various alternative courses of action. In order to choose the right action, it is necessary to evaluate those various possibilities, and judge them by approving or disapproving of its particular elements. Thus, choice is a kind of judgement based on rational premises. James Urmson points out that cleverness is not the ability to plan actions, but it is necessary "after deliberation has terminated and the plan has been made" (Urmson 1988, 82). As an executive ability, it is a condition of putting the plan into effect. Urmson emphasizes the difference between planning and execution: they are two separate stages of an action, and each requires different abilities. "Part of knowing how to get things done is (...) mainly a matter of having the requisite information" (Urmson 1988, 82) thus requiring comprehension and sagacity which allow one to get the situation right. To successfully put the plan into operation, in turn, one needs cleverness, and often courage.

It results from the above deliberations that practical wisdom is not in-born, given to us by nature, but that it is acquired by human practice. The conviction that such intellectual excellence can be developed means that the wickedness of character isn't a valid excuse for wrongdoing (cf. Demos 1961, 161-162). Practical wisdom is an ability, like moral virtues, which is achieved by effort and experience (even though it is not available to everyone in the same degree). As a capacity which develops with practice, it is concerned with how to act and what to be like. Thus, it combines two areas: that of action and that of character. Even if not all of their respective elements can be developed, such as one's temperament or certain circumstances of life, everyone may, to such degree as is available to him, develop and strive to perfection in both his actions and character.

4. Practical wisdom and its role in ethics

Aristotle argues that practical wisdom is a disposition of the rational part of the soul, as it allows a practically wise person to learn the truth.

The truth that is meant here is, naturally, practical truth, i.e. such as is concerned with action, or, more precisely, such as implies the right conduct (cf. Hursthouse 2006, 285). Practical wisdom means excellence of practical action. It is the most important virtue with respect to the moral dimension of action in view of the nature of human *praxis*. When we come to consider the right human conduct, there are no “fixed definitions”. This means any attempt at defining precisely how to act in particular situations is doomed to failure. General assertions on how we should behave lack precision, as they do not take into account the particular circumstances which to a large extent determine the success or failure of our actions. Even the golden mean principle is not a recipe which can be applied “as instructed”. For the mean “is neither one nor the same thing for all”. This is due to the fact that “behaviour is concerned with particulars”. In view of the diversity and lack of stability in the sphere of human actions, it is impossible to formulate “universal rules which we can rely on in making practical decisions” (Devereux 1986, 501). Consequently, it is “the agents themselves who must always adapt to the circumstances”. That, however, is not an easy thing to do. Unlike the arithmetic mean, which is descriptive, the mean measure is normative (or axiological) in that it defines what is right, appropriate or due (see Brown 1997, 78-79). That, in turn is relative, as it means the experience of passions “at the right time, for the right reason, to the right end and in the right manner”. Thus, the right conduct is different in each situation, depending on a number of circumstances. Practical wisdom allows us to apply the mean measure understood that way by enabling us to choose the correct course of action in particular circumstances, i.e. such as is consistent with the right judgment. It may thus be inferred that practical knowledge related to practical wisdom differs from theoretical knowledge. The latter deals with invariable things, or such as cannot be otherwise, while practical knowledge deals with that which may undergo change, or to human *praxis*. And while there is the “final principle that one should always act in a way that promotes eudaemonia”, for obvious reasons it may never “give guidance in practical situations” (Urmson 1988, 86). There are also certain general rules which say what actions are worthwhile in view of the pursuit of happiness,⁹ they do not, however, tell us how to act in a par-

⁹ Having a concept of the goal of happiness is a necessary element of practical wisdom. It refers to universal assumptions and is the basis for the major premise in practical reasoning. And yet, as David Bostock has pointed out, Aristotle “does not make any

ticular situation. “They do not obviate the need for a final judgement, in the light of all the facts, which does not follow automatically from any simple principle or principles” (Urmson 1988, 86). Consequently, a “wise person’s judgement about how to act in a particular case is perfectly determinate and appropriate to the situation” (Devereux 1986, 496). Therefore, practical wisdom is not a set of practical rules of conduct, but consists of a number of “various subordinate excellences of intelligence” (Urmson 1988, 81) such as: sagacity, comprehension, shrewdness, good deliberation. These abilities allow man to recognize what course of action will promote happiness, and what will not.

Since one of the elements of practical wisdom is the capacity to plan one’s life well, it cannot be reduced to purely procedural rationality, but, as has been emphasized by Matthew Bedke, it should be understood as substantial rationality. Practical wisdom is more than just efficient planning and effective action which leads to the achievement of particular goals. Rationality which is the basis of practical wisdom goes beyond the means-to-ends relationship, and refers to the end itself. “So wise planning and deliberation have to satisfy two criteria; they must conduce to the desired end and the end must be good, that is, it must lead towards *eudaimonia*” (Urmson 1988, 81). That is why practical wisdom should be distinguished from practical intelligence, which may be defined as an effective strategy without any reference to universal principles. For Aristotle, practical reasoning is based on a general premise which encompasses certain general principles (cf. Thornton 1982, 63, 73, 75) or principles which result from the thesis that the ultimate good is happiness which consists in acting in accordance with reason and moral virtue. Judgement, which is the basis of action, is founded on certain universal and objective principles, and not only on empirical facts. These moral principles are the criterion of right reasons and the foundation for just judgements. Therefore, it is a condition of practical wisdom to enact, by choosing appropriate means, that which both appears good to us and is objectively so. The conduct of a wise person is motivated by normative reasons, i.e. such as represent good (also morally

real attempt to spell out just how the practically wise man conceives of the ultimate end, *eudaimonia*”. He only says that a practically wise person is capable of deliberating on that which is good for him with reference to the “right way of living in general”. He must, therefore, know what is the ultimate end, that is, happiness (cf. Bostock 2006, 82-100).

good) reasons for taking a particular course of action. Practical wisdom is realized when the reasons that motivate us are also normative reasons, i.e. when man does what he wants to do and at the same time what he should do in particular circumstances (see Bedke 2008).

It results from the above that practical wisdom has a cognitive function. Moral judgement, which is an expression of practical wisdom, is cognitive in that it may, using the criterion of just judgment, be referred to as true or false. Raphael Demos has pointed out, however, that it is also endowed with emotive and imperative meaning. Emotive meaning is given to practical wisdom by moral virtue, which brings about the desire of good, a constitutive element of practical wisdom. The virtue contained in practical wisdom does not only consist in desiring and pursuing good, but also in deriving pleasure from morally good conduct. Its imperative character, in turn, results from the fact that practical wisdom “commands, tell us what to do and what not to do”. The conclusion one arrives at through reasoning is a command which is rationally substantiated, since it results from a certain universal moral imperative (cf. Demos 1961, 153, 155-156, 158).

Practical wisdom thus performs the function which in classical ethics is attributed to conscience. Aristotle’s text seems to prove that thesis, as we can read in it that “practical wisdom issues commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done”. Like conscience, practical wisdom judges what course of action is most appropriate in particular circumstances. Raphael Demos points out that Aristotle treats conclusions, or judgments of practical wisdom, as

(a) imperatives, as (b) decisions or choices, and as (c) actions. Arranging these in a temporal order, we have first the imperative: «I *should* act thus and so»; next we have the decision: «I *will* act thus and so»; finally we have the actual doing of it by me («I do it» taken as a description). The difference between *a* and *b* is that in the first step I address an imperative to myself, while in the second I *commit* myself to obeying it. (Demos 1961, 158)

The judgement which is an expression of practical wisdom, just like the judgment of conscience, has the form of an imperative which may then be acknowledged or rejected by the agent (decision), and consequently, the action he takes may be consistent with that judgement or not. Moreover, in both cases each of these stages may occur implicitly or unconsciously. And even though conscience is innate, and practical wisdom is not, both capaci-

ties may be developed and improved. Finally, both conscience and practical wisdom sometimes encounter limits which they cannot go beyond; for there are situations in human life (which Karl Jasper referred to as borderline situations) in which one does not and may not know how to act, since any action brings disastrous effects. Therefore, any human ability, including practical knowledge, is limited. That which differentiates a wise man from one who does not possess wisdom is the awareness of that which is doubtful and irrational.

In spite of that limitation, and in the light of what has been said so far, we may conclude that practical wisdom is a tool which allows man to move “efficiently” in the moral space. Which, it appears, makes it an inseparable element of morality. In other words, it is an integral part of ethics understood as the pursuit of a good and happy life. It seems that the goal and essence of practical wisdom and ethics are the same. Or, to be more exact, the goal of ethics is achievable with practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is a “fusion of believing, feeling and willing”¹⁰ and unlike merely cognitive apprehension, it can move to action. It is the ability to choose and put into operation that which is good for a particular man, or, in other words, that which is in his interest, which promotes his happiness. In the words of Daniel Devereux, “a practically wise person has what he needs to achieve his aims” (Devereux 1986, 494).

The ethical meaning of practical wisdom also results from the fact that its moral judgement is more important as motivation for acting than a general principle. “If there is a discrepancy between the particular judgment of the practically wise person and a universal rule which applied to the situation, (...) it is the particular judgment that is authoritative” (Devereux 1986, 498). Thus, practical wisdom refers not only to “typical” situations, but perhaps first of all to those which are exceptions from universal rules. It allows one not only to understand that every general principle is limited, but also to go beyond it. Its unlimited scope means that moral judgements are not reduced to that which is accepted or practiced by the society. Therefore, moral judgement both requires and develops imagination and moral sensibility. In essence, it is the opposite of the instrumental treatment of all kinds of moral principles or ethics in general. Its proper task, consisting in matching means to ends, may only be fulfilled if it also in-

¹⁰ “(a) it is a statement (that the action is right), (b) it is an expression of care for the right, and (c) it expresses an urge for the doing of it” (Demos 1961, 160).

cludes an understanding of the end. Therefore, part of practical wisdom is answering the question about happiness, or the knowledge of universal rules.

Can practical wisdom be considered a central ethical category, then? A category which provides the foundations for ethics should be related not only to the instruments used in one's actions, but also to the ends one pursues. Its role should consist in the evaluation, correction, definition of goals, and making sure that they are not contradictory, or mutually exclusive. That task can be fulfilled if there is a proper criterion in place for the evaluation of individual goals. Such criterion may consist in a certain supreme goal of human life, in reference to which we may arrange our pursuits and aspirations, assign values to them and order them in a hierarchy. Actions conceived as means to a supreme end provide meaning to the concept of rationality: our behaviour is rational when it promotes achievement of the ultimate goal. Thus, with practical wisdom, man not only does the right thing, but also knows why he acts one way and not another. Practical reasoning, which encompasses premises and conclusions, provides both the choice of appropriate action and its substantiation. The contents of premises answer both the question "why?" and "what for?", thus providing the reason for our actions. A comprehensive explanation showing that an action is performed in pursuit of a certain good is a perfectly valid and justified motive for acting.

Although Aristotle clearly says that practical wisdom deals with means, and not with ends, possessing practical wisdom implies having the right ends. Moreover, the ends we pursue are the means to achieve higher goals. It may thus be concluded that practical reasoning, which is a function of practical wisdom, also deals with ends, or, more precisely, with choosing from among them. We deliberate on what we should pursue at a particular moment, trying to define the relationship between particular actions and the ultimate goal of happiness. If all human activity is teleological, practical wisdom is of primary importance; for if every action is aimed at some end, and each end becomes the means to another end, the ability to properly grasp the relationship between means and ends is fundamental.

The fact that practical wisdom is not related to any set of rules or opinions, but is based on the reasoning ability and moral virtue, makes it universal. It is the ability to guide actions by making the right choices. Moreover, right actions founded on right choices are a means to a good life (happiness), which is the ultimate goal. Thus, practical wisdom appears to be

an intellectual ability which allows one to recognize how to achieve happiness. It is a condition for the realization of virtues, which, in turn, refer to and order the most important spheres of human life (social, family and professional relationships) (see Polansky 2000, 323-333). Naturally, depending on the society, culture, or moral theory, there are various models of virtue; they always occur, however. Consequently, depending on the practical and theoretical context, *phronesis* is a commonly acknowledged and universal human capacity. It is indispensable whenever man acts deliberately, since the achievement of a goal requires deliberation and making the right choices. By determining the form of a morally good and just action, practical wisdom allows us to lead a good life. The central place which practical wisdom may take in ethics results from the fact that moral judgements (referring to obligations) have their source in practical reason, which is the proper, from the moral point of view, motivation for acting. In other words, with practical knowledge we know (or may know) what should be done in a particular situation, i.e. what optimum course of action to take (cf. Dahl 1984, 3-4).

The above analyses provide a good explanation of why *phronesis* is often translated not as practical, but as moral wisdom. Practical wisdom combines the knowledge of what is good, or universal principles, with the ability to act in accordance with that criterion. Such interpretation results from Aristotle's conviction that the ability to apply the knowledge of how we should live to particular choices is of key importance for human *praxis*. Which is why the process of forming one's character is so important, as it enables us to establish a proper hierarchy of goods and make right choices. Self-development must be subordinated to the idea of the ultimate end, however, since the right choice may only be made from the perspective of the entire life. The ethical aspect of practical wisdom consists precisely in that it requires one to perceive one's life as a whole and understand what ends are served by particular actions.

5. Conclusion

The above deliberations on the ethical dimension of practical wisdom have been an attempt at substantiating the claim that practical wisdom can be treated as a central ethical category. That thesis is supported by the conclusions of my analysis, which demonstrate that: 1. practical wisdom

enables the right conduct, i.e. good action; 2. it goes beyond the means-to-ends relationship, and refers to the end itself; 3. its nature is imperative, i.e. it commands what should be done; 4. referring to untypical situations, it allows one to understand that any general principle is limited; 5. it is the intellectual ability to recognize how happiness can be achieved. It should be noted, however, that both the thesis and the conclusions by which it is supported are grounded in the assumptions of Aristotelian ethics and the concept of practical wisdom itself. The Stagirite believes that 1) practical reasoning is based on a general premise which encompasses certain general principles, or principles which result from the thesis that the ultimate good is happiness which consists in acting in accordance with reason and ethical virtue; 2) practical wisdom is a disposition of the rational part of the soul, as it allows a practically wise person to learn the truth; 3) it cannot be reduced to purely procedural rationality, but should be understood as substantial rationality, i.e. such as allows us to do not only what appears good to us, but also what is objectively good, and thus to achieve happiness. Such understanding of practical wisdom and its relationship to happiness, understood as the ultimate good, allows us to validly conclude that practical wisdom may be treated as a central ethical category.

References

- ARISTOTLE (1915): *On Virtues and Vices*. In: *Works of Aristotle*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- ARISTOTLE (1915a): *Magna Moralia*. In: *Works of Aristotle*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- ARISTOTLE (2009): *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics.
- ARISTOTLE (2014): *Metaphysics*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Adelaide: The University of Adelaide.
- BEDKE, M. S. (2008): Practical Reasons, Practical Rationality, Practical Wisdom. *Ethic Theory and Moral Practice* 11, 85-111.
- BOSTOCK, D. (2006): *Aristotle's Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- BROWN, L. (1997): What is "The Mean Relative to Us" in Aristotle's Ethics? *Phronesis* 42, 77-93.
- DAHL, N.O. (1984): *Practical Reason, Aristotle, and the Weakness of the Will*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- DEMOS, R. (1961): Remarks on Aristotle's Doctrine of Practical Reason. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 22, 153-162.

- DEVEREUX, D.T. (1986): Particular and Universal in Aristotle's Conception of Practical Knowledge. *The Review of Metaphysics* 39, 483-504.
- HURSTHOUSE, R. (2006): Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. New Series* 106, 285-309.
- JACOBS, J. (1989): Practical Wisdom, Objectivity and Relativism. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26, 199-209.
- POLANSKY, R. (2000): "Phronesis" on Tour: Cultural Adaptability of Aristotelian Ethical Notions. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 10, 323-336.
- SCHOLLMEIER, P. (1989): Aristotle on Practical Wisdom. *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 43, 124-132.
- STAWELL, F.M. (1904): The Practical Reason in Aristotle. *International Journal of Ethics* 14, 469-480.
- THORNTON, T. (1982): Aristotelian Practical Reason. *Mind* XCI, 57-76.
- URMSON, J.O. (1988): *Aristotle's Ethics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.