THE GREAT QUESTION OF PRACTICAL TRUTH, AND A DIMINUTIVE ANSWER

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1. Introduction

Aristotle uses the phrase, 'practical truth' (*alētheia praktikē*) precisely once.[1] St. Thomas never uses a corresponding Latin phrase – except once, when paraphrasing Aristotle in his Ethics commentary.[2] His own favored phrases leave the word for truth unqualified: he speaks of "truth of practical reason" (*veritas rationis practicae*); "truth of the practical intellect" (*verum intellectus practici*); or even "truth of the practical intellectual virtue" (*verum virtutis intellectualis practicae*).[3] Yet for all that the idea that there is some distinctive kind of "practical truth" fascinates commentators and has seemed important. In evidence of which, in her famous paper, *Thought and Action in Aristotle*, Elizabeth Anscombe asserts at one point that, «We now approach the great question: what does Aristotle mean by 'practical truth'?» She adds that the entire goal of her paper «has been to expound the concept of 'practical truth'».[4] More recently, Sarah Broadie in her *Nicomachean Ethics* commentary asserts that «This strange notion of practical truth is central for Aristotelian ethics.»[5]

Probably because Aristotle says so little about it, commentators are liable

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[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2, 1139a26-7.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia Ethic.*, lib. 6, l.2, n.6. A close examination of *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 4, *corpus*, would suggest that St. Thomas even goes out of his way to *avoid* using the phrase *veritas pratica* -since the passage has contexts in which St. Thomas might easily have used the phrase, but he instead writes in such a way as to make *practica* govern *rectitudo*, not *veritas*: for instance, *non est eadem veritas vel rectitudo practica*.

[3] See *ST* I-II, q. 64, a.3, *corpus*; *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 5, ad 3; *Super Sent.*, lib. 3, d. 33, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 2 corpus; qc 3 arg. 6; also in the *Sententia Ethic.*, ad loc. On what St. Thomas means by these phrases, see S.L. Brock, *Realistic Practical Truth*, in *The "Preambula Fidei" and the New Apologetics*, Proceedings of the VIII Plenary Session, Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, 20-22 June 2008.

[4] E. Anscombe, *Thought and Action in Aristotle. What is Practical Truth?*, in *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein. The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*, vol. I, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1981, p. 76.

[5] S. Broadie and C. Rowe (editors), *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 362.

to interpret practical truth in radically different ways. One might distinguish Kantian, Expressivist and Anscombian interpretations.

On the Kantian interpretation, which we see clearly in John Rawls' Dewey lectures, on *Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory*,[6] practical truth is distinctive insofar as it does not involve a correspondence between reason and some standard apart from reason. Rather, it involves the answerability of practical reason to canons which are internal to it. As Rawls says, «this conception is not regarded as a workable approximation to the moral facts: there are no such moral facts to which the principles adopted could approximate.»[7] I shall say no more about this view, because I am not ultimately interested in it, except to underline that, on this interpretation, practical reason does *not* get it right by conforming itself to anything outside of itself.

The second, 'Expressivist' interpretation, is not unlike a view defended by Elizabeth Anderson in her book, *Value in Ethics and Economics*.[8] On this view, actions themselves are true or false – and therefore have a value beyond their consequences – insofar as they express, or fail to express, something about the agent who does them. (This interpretation gets life from some old meanings associated with words such as 'true', which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* originally meant loyalty and faithfulness, as to a commander, friend, or promise.[9] From this it is not a far step to applying the word also to things, rather than persons, insofar as a thing matches or conforms to a pattern). On this view, 'practical truth' would be the congruence of a person's actions to some standard of action which he embraces, say, of what it is to be happy, or of what properly counts as a flourishing human life'. (Those who are familiar with St. Thomas will recognize that this understanding of truth in action corresponds to one of the senses of true that he recognizes, viz. he holds that an artifact is true insofar as it corresponds to the plan or concept of the maker who makes that artifact).[10]

The third interpretation, due to Anscombe, is much more subtle and starts from an appreciation of what it is for an action to be a *human action* in the

[6] S. Freeman (editor), *Collected Papers of John Rawls*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 2001, pp. 303-358.

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 350.

[8] E. Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1995.

[9] The first entry under "true" reads: «Of persons: Steadfast in adherence to a commander or friend, to a principle or cause, to one's promises, faith, etc.; firm in allegiance; faithful, loyal, constant, trusty.»

[10] ST I, q. 16, a. 1, *corpus*: «*Unde unaquaeque res dicitur vera absolute, secundum ordinem ad intellectum a quo dependet. Et inde est quod res artificiales dicuntur verae per ordinem ad intellectum nostrum, dicitur enim domus vera, quae assequitur similitudinem formae quae est in mente artificis; et dicitur oratio vera, inquantum est signum intellectus veri. Et similiter res naturales dicuntur esse verae, secundum quod assequuntur similitudinem specierum quae sunt in mente divina.*»

first place.[11] The crucial idea for this view, is that a human action differs from things that happen in the natural world, principally through its being the case that a human action is "done under a description". For example, when a rock falls off the cliff after a tremor, its trajectory and fall can be adequately described by the laws of physics; in contrast, when someone *acts so as to drop a rock off the cliff*, although the path of the rock is still describable by the laws of physics, the *action* itself of that person's "dropping the rock off the cliff" admits now of being described in an additional way, viz. as *an act of dropping the rock*.

Moreover, because we are purposeful agents, we choose an action as falling under a *series* of descriptions, which have a nested character, e.g. in dropping a rock off the cliff, the man at the same time showed to his hiking partner the exposure of their position, and thereby frightened him (as was his aim), establishing in his own mind (at least) his own superiority, in view of his own freedom from fear in the circumstances. Here the one physical phenomenon – the rock's leaving the hiker's hand – enters into four actions: a dropping, a displaying, a provoking, and an act of self-magnification.

Clearly, when someone *drops a rock off the cliff*, there are far more truths which are at work than when a rock is dislodged in a tremor: for example, if you point at the falling rock after its been released, it's *true* now that "*This* is (or is part of) an action of someone's having dropped the rock;" also, it's *true* that "The dropping of the rock *is* the displaying of the extent of the exposure to his companion;" and it's also *true* that "His displaying in that way the exposure of their position was an act of self-magnification."

As Anscombe writes: «The notion of truth or falsehood in action would quite generally be countered by the objection that 'true' and 'false' are senseless predicates as applied to what is done» – say, because actions are regarded as simply the physical effects of acts of the will, and thus not the sorts of things that can be either true or false. But, Anscombe then says, «If I am right there is philosophy to the contrary in Aristotle. And if, as I should maintain, the idea of descriptions under which what is done is voluntary is integral to the notion of action (*praxis*), then these predicates [that is, 'true' and 'false'] apply to actions (*praxeis*) strictly and properly, and not merely by an extension and in a way that ought to be explained away.»[12]

When Anscombe says that the predicate «true *properly* applies to actions, what she means, I think, is that *that action does not even exist*, except as being chosen "under a certain description;» thus, that *that description is true of it*, is built already into the action as so constituted and identified. It's not that the

[11] See E. Anscombe, *Practical Truth*, in M. Geach and L. Gormally (eds.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, (St. Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs), Imprint Academic, Exeter 2005, pp. 149-158.

[12] E. Anscombe, *Thought and Action*, cit., p. 77.

man does an action which then *happens* to get correctly described in a certain way; rather it's that the description is, as it were, the plan for his action, and thus the action, when carried out, *of course* satisfies that description. The description could not but be true of it, seeing that it was an action of that sort.

Note that on Anscombe's approach, we will not wish to deny that there are true claims about actions that are true by correspondence: we can allow that if someone says, truly, that «In dropping the rock the hiker displayed the great exposure on the cliff,» what he says is true – because the hiker's action is as he says it is. After all, there exists something of which the subject of that statement is true, viz. an act of dropping the rock, and the predicate truly applies to that subject, because his act of dropping the rock was an act of displaying something. And yet that descriptive and, presumably, theoretical thought is true only because the hiker who dropped the rock first engaged in some process of deliberation, in an appropriate social context, through which he concluded, «So then I'll just drop this rock to show him how exposed this cliff really is»: and then he acted, intentionally, with a view to that.

Anscombe sometimes writes as if she thinks it is the action itself that is a practical truth. After all, in *De Motu* Aristotle seems to hold that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an action,[13] and yet one would reasonably suppose that the conclusion of a sound syllogism is a truth: practical truth, she elsewhere says, is «the good working, or work, of practical judgment, and practical judgement is judgement of the kind described [viz. beginning with a conception of happiness and working from there to particulars] *terminating in action.*»[14] Thus, she suggests, practical truth is not the truth of the *judgments* relied upon in practical reasoning, but something else – presumably the action.

Nonetheless – although she does speak in this way – if her view is considered carefully, it would seem to be, not that the *action* is a truth, but rather that the action *makes descriptions true*: as she says, the good work of practical intelligence, or «truth in agreement with right desire,» «is brought about – i.e. made true – by action (since the description of what he does is made true by his doing it).»[15] Thus her considered view seems to be that practical truths are the descriptions of actions made true by those actions, not the actions themselves.

2. Practical Truth in *Nicomachean Ethics* vi. 2

Thus, we have three interpretations of "practical truth": on the Kantian, practical truths are propositions (or "principles"), but these are true not on account

[13] Aristotle, *De Motu*, 701 a23.

[14] E. Anscombe, *Thought and Action*, cit., p. 77.

[15] *Ibidem*.

of correspondence but rather only if they capture rationality as working out standards internal to practical rationality itself; on the Expressivist interpretation, practical truths are actions, and actions are true if they express an agent's sound concept; and, finally, on the Anscombian interpretation, practical truths are judgments about actions, which admit of being true because of the rational structure which human agents put into physical activity (which is what an action is), through that activity's having come about in a certain way, that is, through a rational agent's deliberation with a view to an end. Here the truth of those judgments is a matter of correspondence, but of a correspondence which is not "chance" but rather which is the inevitable result simply of identifying the action correctly in the first place.[16]

So which, if any of these views, is Aristotle's? Actually, none. Aristotle's view is considerably simpler, and plainer, than any of these three interpretations. In order to show this, I first give a translation of the relevant text and then offer some observations, which imply a different interpretation. Yet, although this interpretation is simpler and plainer, it is not without its own interest, as I shall explain in some concluding remarks in which I draw out a few of its consequences.

We need to grasp, then, what is the best condition of each of these. That is the virtue of each: the virtue of a thing is relative to the task which is proper to that it.

CHAPTER 2

[A] Three things in the soul govern action and truth: sense perception, thought, and inclination. Of these, sense perception does not originate any action. This is clear from animals which have sense perception but have no share in action. But the very thing which, for thinking, is affirmation and denial, for inclination is pursuit and avoidance.

[B] Here's the upshot: since virtue of character is a state which issues in choice; and choice is inclination informed by deliberation; it's necessary – on account of these things – that the claim be true and the inclination correct, if the choice is to be good; also, that the things affirmed be the same as those pursued.

[C] This, then, is action-directed thinking and truth.

[D] As regards thinking which is aimed just at seeing – when thinking is aimed neither at acting nor at making a product – for it to be done well or badly is for it to be true or false. That's the task of any faculty of thought. But as regards that part of

[16] Each interpretation, of course, has its corresponding account of practical falsehood. An interesting feature of the Anscombian interpretation, where practical falsehood would be a false description of an action, or of the relation of nestedness of descriptions of actions, is that an agent himself, if he lacks self-knowledge, may be wrong about the correct description of his own action.

it which aims at acting as well as thinking, its task is truth in agreement with correct inclination.

[E] So then, for an action, its origin is a choice (that is, its origin "whence the change," but not its origin "for the sake of which"); but, for a choice, its origin is an inclination and a claim for "the sake of something."

[F] That is why if one takes away thought and thinking, or the character trait, then there is no longer choice. The reason is that success in action, and its opposite, are not possible without both thinking and a character trait.

[G] It's not thinking which initiates motion, but thinking which is for the sake of something, and which aims at acting.

[H] – Thinking which aims at acting is even what starts off thinking which aims at making. How so? Because anyone who makes anything, makes it for the sake of something. It's not "this product," (full stop), which is his goal, but "this product for something and for someone." And yet "this thing done" is his goal, since success in action is a goal; it is what his inclination is for.

[I] That's why a choice is either thought informed by inclination or inclination informed by thought.

[J] A human being just is that sort of an origin.

[K] Nothing in the past is an object of choice. No one, for instance, chooses "to have sacked Troy." That's because no one deliberates about the past, but rather about the future and what admits of being otherwise. (The past doesn't admit of not having come to be.) That's why Agathon was right to say:

Truly, God is deprived of one power only:

To make as unbegun, whatsoever has been done.

[L] As regards each part which is such as to think, then, its task is truth. Hence, any condition which is such that it makes one of these parts arrive at truth, is a virtue of that part.

The passage occurs in book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle discusses the intellectual as opposed to the moral virtues (1139 a15-b13). Just before this passage, Aristotle distinguishes two parts of the intellectual part of the soul: one part, he says, is theoretical, and one part is calculative and practical. He presumes, as is usual for him, that the virtue of a thing is that which enables it to carry out its distinctive task well. To identify the virtues of each, he therefore needs to identify their distinctive functions, and that is what he takes himself to accomplish in the passage under consideration. Truth, he says, is the distinctive accomplishment of intellect, and practical truth of practical intellect. Note that he reaches this conclusion by the end of segment [D], although he summarizes it again at the end. The rest of the chapter, as is typical for Aristotle, consists of amplifications, asides, supporting considerations, and replies to anticipated objections.

The two chief questions to consider are: To what does the property "true"

attach for practical truth?, and What makes it so that a practical truth is true?

As regards the first, it seems clear that, for Aristotle, only "affirmations and denials" (*kataphaseis* and *apophaseis*), or "assertions" (*to phanai*), are true, as regards practical as well as theoretical truth. This may be seen if we attend carefully to the sentence in segment [C] above: «This, then, is action-directed thinking (*dianoia*) and truth.» The demonstrative pronounce which begins the sentence ("this", *hautē*), is used in a manner typical for Aristotle, in order to mark out or delimit a species within a larger genus. In some cases, when he uses the demonstrative in this way, Aristotle explicitly supplies the word for the genus, as in the following two examples from discussions in nearby passages in the *Ethics*:

«This sort of justice (*hautē men oun hē dikaiosunē*), then, is not a part of virtue but virtue in its entirety» (1130a8-9).

«This sort of thinking (*dianoia d'hautē*) moves nothing» (1139 b1-2).

In other cases, however, the word for the genus is only implicit, but it could be made explicit, to make the meaning clear. There are examples of this usage, too, elsewhere in the *Ethics*:

«This (*hautē*) involves passions and actions,» that is, «This *sort of virtue* involves passions and actions» (1106 b16-7).

«This, then, (*Hautē men oun*) as regards duration and everything else is complete,» that is, «This *sort of friendship* as regards duration and everything else is complete» (1156 b 33-4).

So the correct way to understand the demonstrative at the beginning of the sentence in segment [C] is as delimiting a kind or a sort of something, and, from the context – and especially given what Aristotle goes on to say in [G], which is precisely a contrasting assertion, picking out a different species – it is evident that the word giving the implicit genus would be "thinking" (*dianoia*). So the proper construction of [C] would be:

«This *sort of thinking*, then, is action-directed thinking and truth.»

But Aristotle is clear that thinking issues in "affirmations and denials," so presumably the truth of these would be practical truth.[17] If Aristotle had not included *dianoia* in sentence in [C], the interpretation there of the phrase

[17] It is evident that the demonstrative pronoun could not pick up any substantive in the preceding sentence. The only plausible candidate (*logos*) is not feminine, and the feminine substantives found there (*orexis*, *prohairesis*, *aretē*, *hexis*) are not plausible candidates. Nor can Aristotle mean the correspondence between *logos* and *orexis*, since that would be indicated with a generic neuter singular pronoun, *touto*. I wish to thank Fr. Kevin Flannery for questions which forced me to get clearer about the meaning of *hautē* in [C].

"practical truth" might have been unclear; but given that he has added it and roughly marked it out as the same as practical truth, we are obliged to interpret practical truth as being the truth of what *dianoia* issues in.

This conclusion is reinforced by the following consideration. In light of the repetition of the definite article (*hē*) in [C], it is not implausible to understand the sentence as involving brachylogy:

«This *sort of thinking*, then, is action-directed thinking, and *this sort of truth is action-directed* truth.»

If this were what was meant, then "action-directed truth" would have a meaning which would be in part independent of its linkage with "action-directed thinking". But then the phrase would naturally point back to "it's necessary … that the claim be true" in [B], and once again we have the result that practical truth is a truth, not of actions or of inclinations, but simply of "claims" (*logoi*).

But, of course, this is Aristotle's view throughout book VI. Obviously the truth which is the function or task of theoretical intellect involves its articulating true claims (*logoi*), that is, various true affirmations or denials. Again, the point of developing a science, Aristotle says elsewhere in the book, is precisely reliably to generate in a domain only true claims: a science consists of the habit of affirming true axioms and deducing true consequences from these. Again, Aristotle begins the next chapter, VI. 3, with a remark intended as a summary, «Set it down, then, that those states by which the soul attains to truth by affirmation or denial are five in number», and then he lists: skill (*technē*), knowledge (*epistēmē*), practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), wisdom (*sophia*), and insight (*nous*). So apparently he regards all of these states as resulting in the same sort of thing, and in the other cases, clearly, what these states result in are true propositions. (One might think that a skill aims at a product, not a true proposition, but Aristotle, following Plato, holds that what distinguishes someone with a skill from someone with a mere knack that comes of experience is not success but rather the capacity to give a true account of what he is up to.)

So practical truths, for Aristotle, are true propositions, claims, or perhaps even, as we might say for those that are more basic, "principles." The word *logos* is famously flexible in meaning in Greek. As regards practical reason it probably means what *logos* means as it figures in Aristotle's discussion of the moral virtues, where frequently he says that a virtuous person acts «as reason (*logos*) says (or bids).»[18]

[18] For example, 1117 a8, 1119 a20, b18, 1125 b35, 1138 b20.

3. What Makes Practical Truth True

The next question is, What makes practical truths true? An extensive study of truth in the Aristotelian corpus confirms what others have found and said before me, and namely, that for Aristotle what makes a *logos* true is that it somehow corresponds to what it is about: «to claim that what is, is, or that what is not, is not, is true.»[19] So we should expect practical truths, too, to be true because they correspond with something. But with what? The clue is provided in the claim that we've already drawn attention to in segment [A]: "But the very thing which, for thinking, is affirmation and denial, for inclination is pursuit and avoidance." Correspondence must involve some kind of isomorphism, and a natural way of interpreting this claim is that there is a sufficient enough isomorphism between assertions and inclinations that the one can be true or false of the other.

After all, it is not obvious in advance that that should be so. A *logos* has complexity; an inclination apparently does not. To say only something like, "An inclination exists" would be, so far, not to exhibit any of the "content," so to speak, of the inclination. Or to say "He has an inclination" would be to say something about *him* (that he is in a certain condition); whereas "He has an inclination for *X*s" would say something about *his relatedness*.

I don't think Aristotle has in mind all affirmations and denials, but only a subset which might plausibly be mapped onto inclinations. I think he has in mind principally affirmations and denials using the word "good," such as "Dry foods are good," or "Exercise is good," or "Courageous actions are good." (Likewise, denials would be of the form, "Dry foods are not good," that is, "Dry foods are bad.") I choose the word "good" because Aristotle says that good is appropriately defined as "what everything is inclined to." Thus, instead of saying that I want chocolate ice cream, I can instead assert, "Chocolate ice cream is good" (sc. for me, in some way, as it surely is, at least by being pleasant to eat), and to say that "Dry foods are good for dogs" is to say, so far, that dogs are inclined toward dry foods. But I also suspect he would want to include affirmations and denials in the gerundive form as well, for example, "Dry foods are to be eaten," or "Dry foods are to be eaten by dogs," or "Dry foods are not to be eaten." I add these for two reasons: first, these look to be more natural candidates for a *logos* which may be described as "bidding" (*keleuei*) or "commanding" (*tattei*), which is what Aristotle, in the context of his discussion of the moral virtues, says that *logos* does; second, I see no reason why Aristotle would want to exclude things we are inclined to because they

[19] Aristotle, *Met.*, 1011 b25. The subject of the sentence is "saying" or "making a claim" (*to legein*). See also P. Crivelli, *Aristotle on Truth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004.

are means to ends we are inclined to, and the desirability of means is more naturally expressed with a claim using a gerundivo – for instance, "Money is to be procured," for my goal of getting a suitable birthday present for my friend.

If we accept this suggestion, then we immediately see that there is an interesting difference between making an affirmation corresponding to an inclination, when the person who makes the affirmation has the inclination, and the case when he does not. The latter would be what St. Thomas calls «practical matters considered theoretically.»[20] To choose a Heraclitean example, if I say, "For a pig, lying in the mud is good," I'm not close to desiring to lie in the mud but am merely affirming what I would desire, if I were a pig; or "It's good for this pig to go into the corner of the pen and lie in the mud" is a deduction about how something with the postulated inclination might appropriately act. On the other hand, if the pig were granted rationality and affirmed, "It's good to lie in the mud," it would be affirming the practical truth practically, not theoretically.

Are we in a position to explain why Aristotle says, «it's necessary – on account of these things – that the claim be true and the inclination correct, if the choice is to be good; also, that the things affirmed be the same as those pursued?». Why does he insist that the inclination must be correct (*orthē*)? And what does he mean in saying that the things affirmed should be the same as those pursued? What more does this last claim add above the idea that the claim is true and (therefore) corresponds to the inclination?

Suppose that a healthy pig desires naturally to lie in the mud. Suppose that a pig may nonetheless either be inclined to lie in the mud or not; if it is not inclined to lie in the mud, let's suppose it would be somehow sick. Then there are four cases:

	What it asserts.	What it wants.	Assertion true?
1.	"It's good to lie in the mud."	It wants to lie in the mud.	Yes.
2.	"It's good to lie in the mud."	It does not want to lie in the mud.	No.
3.	"It's not good to lie in the mud."	It wants to lie in the mud.	No.
4.	"It's not good to lie in the mud."	It does not want to lie in the mud.	No.

It would seem that only in case 1 is the assertion true. In case 2, what the pig says is not true, because it is asserting a practical truth only theoretically. The pig can say "It's good to lie in the mud" only in the sense of "People say that it's good for pigs to lie in the mud" or "I know abstractly that it's good for me

[20] «*Speculativa consideratio de re operabili*»: *ST* 1, q. 14, a. 16, *corpus*.

to lie in the mud." In case 3, what the pig says is not true, because there is no agreement between the affirmation which the pig thinks, and the avoidance which the pig's desire displays. Finally, in case 4, what the pig says is not true, because, although the denial agrees with the pig's avoidance of mud, the pig's avoidance is not a correct or right desire (since, we are supposing, it would not want to lie in the mud only because it is somehow sick).

Observe that the schema we are developing differs from emotivism, with which there are superficial similarities, in three ways. First, affirmations and denials which correspond to inclinations are not mere expressions or projections of them, in part because they have content and structure ("combining and separating"); second, as a consequence of this, they can be true or false; and third, it is open for inclinations to be criticized and rejected as "not correct," on objective grounds – that is, on grounds of the substantial form or *ergon*, of the kind of thing we are dealing with. In fact, one might presume to be in a kind and to have certain natural inclinations amounts to the same thing.

But then why does Aristotle say, additionally, and in the manner of an afterthought, that the things affirmed be the same as those pursued? Isn't that already guaranteed in a case in which the affirmation is true? The sentence is obscure, and one can hardly be confident of a correct interpretation. But I think we should understand the sentence in the context of Aristotle's looking to identify a "virtue" of practical reasoning, and he thinks of an intellectual virtue as reliably achieving truth. This is very clear from his treatment of the intellectual virtue of *epistēmē* (knowledge), as already mentioned. A single affirmation which can count as manifesting the virtue of knowledge has to be part of an inferential structure, or, more precisely, it needs to be an execution of the sort which can be made habitually related to other truths from which it is deduced and which one may deduce from it. One wouldn't want the correspondence, then, between true *logos* and reality talked about to be "accidental." That's surely one reason why Aristotle rejects contingent occurrences as fit matters of knowledge. If you see Socrates sitting, and you think "Socrates is sitting," and you turn away from him and continue thinking this, which turns out to be true, because, as it happens, Socrates has not yet gotten up – your thinking that "Socrates is sitting" is true only by accident, and therefore that achievement of truth is not the sort of thing that could be incorporated into an intellectual virtue.

It would not be surprising if Aristotle thought something similar for practical reasoning, that there must be a kind of "tracking" – what economists call "robustness" – in the coincidence between thinking and inclination. Consider how a parent might check whether a small child has correctly named the number of fingers being held up only by accident – if originally the adult had held up three, he might add or subtract another, to make it four or two. If

the child's affirmations can correctly track these changes, then he knows his numbers, and hasn't lit upon the right answer merely by accident. Similarly, we might suppose that thinking corresponds to inclination not "by accident" if changes of thinking imply changes in inclination.

I am not suggesting that any types of changes should follow any types, but that Aristotle has one sort in mind, and he conceives of it as a kind of "tracking" (as we have been calling it), and to his mind this suggests that he is right to consider practical truth as something that can be achieved habitually through the acquisition of a virtue. I think what he has in mind is the way in which we expect that the inclination toward something sought as an end should be transferred to something which through deliberation, we have concluded, serves as a means. For instance, suppose the supposititious rational pig thinks, "It's good for me to lie in the mud," and "Here's mud" – but he doesn't lie in it. If the pig explains this by saying that it didn't *really* want to lie in the mud, then when it had asserted, "It's good for me to lie in the mud," it wasn't affirming a practical truth, but at best a practical truth considered theoretically. That is to say, the proof that a truth is a *practical* truth is that inferences drawn from it are actionable. If choice is desire informed by thinking, or thinking informed by desire, then the desire for mud so informed by this deliberative consideration ought to yield immediately the relevant choice. (This consideration would serve to explain why Aristotle might have regarded *phronēsis*, the virtue of practical reason, as being, in a sense, infallible in arriving at practical truth; it would also explain why he denies adamantly that anyone who has *phronēsis* can at the same time display *akrasia*, or weakness of will).[21]

4. Concluding Observations

I conclude with several comments.

(1) It's clear that what Aristotle means by practical truth is different from all three accounts I mentioned at the beginning. It differs from the Kantian view in affirming that practical truths are true by correspondence; from the Expressivist view, because it holds that *logoi*, not actions, are true; and from the Anscombian view, because it is directed at an altogether different set of philosophical concerns.

(2) It is also clear why Aristotle thinks that *phronēsis* is agent-relative in a way that *sophia* (wisdom) is not. He states later in book VI that «if health and goodness are 'different' in the case of human beings and of fish, as indeed they are, yet white and straight are 'in every case the same': everyone would say that wisdom is 'the same', whereas *practical intelligence* is 'different'.»[22] There's no reason why a "wise man" such as a Heraclitus couldn't see that

[21] See 1145b17-19. [22] 11401 a22-25.

what is good for fish is different from what is good for human beings. But he couldn't affirm practical truths for fish.

(3) It seems that Aristotle takes a distinctive view as regards the motivational force of at least some practical judgments. The debate between "internalism" and "externalism" involves whether ethical judgments are themselves motivating or not, for instance, Is it the case that to say, "One must not kill," implies being motivated in some serious way not to kill? The modern debate tends to view the question linguistically, but Aristotle views it from a psychological point of view, and relative to agents and to correct desire. So, for instance, if a rational pig in good condition says "It's good to lie in mud," "Here is mud," and "I ought to lie in this mud," the first and last statements are both inherently motivating for the pig – that is, they are practical truths affirmed practically – because the pig has a natural inclination to lie in the mud and that inclination is informed by his deliberation to lie in the mud which is there. On the other hand, if he becomes sick, the same assertions lack motivational force.

(4) One might speculate that Aristotle would be committed to a certain primacy as regards practical truths related to natural desires involved in something's being a member of a kind. What I mean is the sort of thing that St Thomas has recourse to in accounting for moral principles binding cases which depart incidentally from what is typical of the species. For example, in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, he asks what would be wrong with a man having sex with a woman outside of marriage if she consents and is wealthy enough to support any children that result. «In the human species,» he replies, «the female is clearly insufficient of herself for the rearing of the offspring, since the need of human life makes many demands, which cannot be met by one parent alone. Hence the fitness of human life requires man to stand by woman after the sexual act is done, and not to go off at once and form connections with any one he meets, as is the way with fornicators. Nor is this reasoning overturned by the fact of some particular woman having wealth and power enough to nourish her offspring all by herself: for in human acts the line of natural rectitude is not drawn to suit the accidental variety of the individual, but the properties common to the whole species (*Quia rectitudo naturalis in humanis actibus non est secundum ea quae per accidens contingunt in uno individuo, sed secundum ea quae totam speciem consequuntur*).»[23] The reasoning seems to have no force against someone set on enjoying the pleasures of fornication: what is it to him if the species in general needs stable marriages to survive? But take Aquinas to be presenting us, in his discussion, with a fragment of practical reasoning which contains practical truth, and therefore which successfully conveys natural inclination, through reasonable deliberations, to

[23] III. 122.

some more definite conclusions at a more particular level, and then the argument has a different cast. Someone who begins by affirming practical truths which correspond to natural desires, and then looks only to what follows from that, will simply never get to any viewpoint from which he can draw the conclusion that he should engage in fornication with the imagined wealthy women.

(5) Finally, suppose we take it that there are certain natural inclinations which are "correct" or "right" – Aristotle in later in book VI evidently thinks that there are such inclinations, somehow corresponding to virtues, and that *phronēsis* both presupposes these desires as its starting point, and tends, in its own working, to preserve these desires from corruption.[24] Suppose furthermore that we take seriously the suggestion that the *logoi* which are practical truths should not be understood as "claims" or "affirmations" so much as "commands" or "orders". Then, it would seem that Aristotle would be willing to countenance some fundamental practical truths related to the natural desires which he presumes, for example, not simply "This is good" ("Friendship is good") but also *logoi* so closely related to the good, such that it would be difficult to see how one might be seeking that good without being prepared to affirm also these *logoi*, involving "Such and such is to be done" (for instance, "Others are to be treated as oneself"). Then, despite what others have claimed, we really would have here all of the rudiments of a theory of natural law: natural because naturally discerned and naturally affirmable as practical truths; and law because consisting of statements in a gerundive form. This would be law not in the manner of a statute but more in the manner of common law, that is, judges situated similarly will decide the cases in the same way. One would only need to suppose that human practical reason is a participation in some higher reason, or that there was a deity responsible for our natural desires – not views entirely alien to Aristotle[25] – and then a full-fledged theory of natural law would be the result.

[24] «That's the reason, too, that we refer to moderation by the name *sōphrosunē*, as 'safeguarding practical intelligence' (*sōzousan tēn phronesin*). What the virtue safeguards is a presupposition of a that sort. After all, it's not every presupposition which something pleasant or painful corrupts and subverts – say, whether a triangle does or does not contain two right angles – but only a presupposition concerning some matter of action. Why? Each of the first causes of action is a 'that for the sake of which' actions are done. But if someone has been corrupted by pleasure or pain, no first cause is straightforwardly evident; and neither, then, is it evident that it's for the sake of this and on account of this that he should choose and do everything. A vice is such that it tends to destroy a first cause» (1140 b11-20).

[25] For divinely endowed natural desires, see I. 9, 1099 b12-14, III. 5, 1114 b6-12; for fundamental lawfulness as the law of God, see a passage of which early liberal political philosophers were especially fond: «anyone who bids that law should govern seems to bid that God and Intelligence alone should govern,» (ARISTOTLE, *Pol*. III. 16, 1287 a29-30).

Abstract: *This article aims to explicate Aristotle's notion of practical truth. It is argued that, for Aristotle, practical truths are not actions, but propositions which contain gerundives. What makes a practical truth true, like any other truth, is correspondence to reality: a practical truth correctly states what is to be done if correct desire is to attain its end. This conception of practical truth is quite different from that developed by Elizabeth Anscombe, and it differs also from Kantian and expressivist accounts.*

Keywords: *Elizabeth Anscombe, Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, ethics, practical truth.*