Practical wisdom

The syllabus defines practical wisdom as 'the capacity to make informed, rational judgements without recourse to a formal decision procedure'. Many deontological theories argue that there is no formal decision procedure, and in fact even Kant, who has a formal decision procedure, argues that applying the Categorical Imperative correctly involves 'judgment', which cannot be formalized. However, the idea of practical wisdom is today most strongly associated with Aristotle, so we shall focus our discussion on his view of how to make moral decisions.

Practical wisdom (Greek *phronesis*; sometimes translated 'prudence'), says Aristotle, is 'a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man' *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.5). So while practical wisdom involves knowledge of what is good or bad, it is not merely theoretical knowledge, but a capacity to act on such knowledge as well. This capacity requires

1. a general conception of what is good or bad, which Aristotle relates to the conditions for human flourishing;
2. the ability to perceive, in light of that general conception, what is required in terms of feeling, choice, and action in a particular situation;
3. the ability to deliberate well; and
4. the ability to act on that deliberation.

Aristotle's theory makes practical wisdom very demanding. The type of insight into the good that is needed and the relation between practical wisdom and virtues of character are both complex. Practical wisdom cannot be taught, but requires experience of life and virtue. Only the person who is good knows what is good, according to Aristotle.

INSIGHT AND MAKING DECISIONS

Aristotle argues that practical wisdom involves more than one kind of insight. First, there is insight into 'what is good or bad for man', viz. insight into human flourishing. Second, practical wisdom involves understanding what is required in a particular situation in light of a general understanding of what is good. The question that faces us on any occasion is how to achieve what is good – part of a good life – in the here and now, in this situation. But there are no rules for applying knowledge of the good life to the current situation. What is right on a particular occasion is in accordance with 'right reason' (orthos logos), but this can vary from one occasion to another. Furthermore, this kind of insight is inseparable from making a good decision: we must not only understand the situation (which can involve considerable sensitivity), but also how to act well in it.

This makes it impossible to make true generalizations – ones that will hold in all cases – about right and wrong, good and bad. Our reasoning on 'variable' matters, our deliberation, is a form of intuitive reason. Practical wisdom 'grasps' the particular facts involved in the case. This does not make ethics subjective, as there is a truth of the matter to be discovered. However, proving the truth of one view against another is not

possible by argument alone. If you are blind, I may not be able to convince you of the colour of moonlight; if you lack insight into what is good, I may not be able to convince you of the goodness of being kind.

And so, Aristotle argues, ethical understanding is not something that can be taught, for what can be taught is general, not particular. Rules and principles will rarely apply in any clear way to real situations. Instead, moral knowledge is only acquired through experience.

A third kind of insight relates to what is a virtue. In one way, this is like insight into human flourishing, since it involves knowing which character traits are necessary for a good life; on the other, it is like insight into the particular situation, since it involves knowing how to respond emotionally here and now. If we feel emotions and desires, and make decisions, 'well', i.e. virtuously, we feel and choose 'at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way'.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

In a situation in which you are being bullied, you could feel angry too much or too little, 'and in both cases not well'. There are lots of ways in which we can act and feel 'unreasonably'. Aristotle defends the 'doctrine of the mean', the idea that a virtuous response or action is 'intermediate'. Just as there is a right time, object, person etc. at which to feel angry (or any emotion), some people can feel angry too often, about too many things, and towards too many people, or they get too angry or get angry to scare others. Other people can feel angry not often enough, regarding too few objects and people (perhaps they don't understand how people are taking advantage of them). Someone who gets angry 'too much' is short-tempered. We don't have a name for someone who gets angry too little. Someone who has the virtue relating to anger is good-tempered. The virtue is the 'intermediate' state between the two vices of 'too much' and 'too little'. Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does not claim that when you get angry, you should only ever be moderately angry. You should be as angry as the situation demands, which can be very angry.

Many virtues fit this model, Aristotle argues. Some, like good temper, work with feelings. Other virtues, like honesty, work with motives for actions. Telling the truth 'too much' is tactlessness. Telling it 'too little' is lying when you shouldn't. The virtue of honesty involves telling the truth at the right times, to the right people, etc.

This knowledge, of what is the right time, objects, people, motive, and way for certain emotions or choices, is practical knowledge of how to live a good life.

OBJECTIONS

Aristotle argues that practical wisdom requires virtue. Without a good character, we cannot understand what is truly good. But this means that knowledge of the good is not within everyone's reach. By contrast, many philosophers argue that everyone is sufficiently rational to understand what is right, or know what is right or wrong through their conscience.

Virtue theorists can respond that knowledge of the good can come in degrees. If someone has a completely depraved character, perhaps they really don't know what is good or bad. But most people will have enough understanding of the good to make moral decisions. Furthermore, people can improve their knowledge of what is good by becoming more virtuous people. This involves reforming their characters.

A second objection is that the doctrine of the mean isn't much help practically. First, 'too much' and 'too little' aren't quantities on a single scale. The list of 'right time, right object, right person, right motive, right way' shows that things are much more complicated than that. Second, this gives us no actual help with understanding, e.g., how often should we get angry, and how angry should we get. But perhaps Aristotle didn't mean the doctrine of the mean to be of real guidance. He repeatedly emphasises that the mean is where the person of practical wisdom judges it to be.

But can his theory of practical wisdom provide any guidance about what to do? If I have practical wisdom, I simply know what to do. But if I do not have practical wisdom, telling me to do what a virtuous person would do doesn't help me because I don't know what the virtuous person would do!

But just because practical wisdom is not a set of rules, that doesn't mean it provides no guidance at all. It suggests we think about situations in terms of the virtues. Rather than ask 'could everyone do this?' (as Kant suggests) or 'what will bring about the best consequences?' (as utilitarianism suggests), we can ask a series of questions: 'would this action be kind/courageous/loyal…?' If we think of actions as expressions of virtue, this could be very helpful.

What about cases in which virtues seem to conflict? For example, can we show justice and mercy, or do we have to choose? Here, the theory of practical wisdom is in the same position as deontology – you need practical wisdom to understand what each virtue actually requires you to do in this particular situation.