

Practical Nous in Aristotle's Ethics
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§1. Introduction

One of the most extensively discussed areas of comparison between Aristotle's two major ethical works, the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) and *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) concerns the role of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in the two treatises, and in particular how Aristotle's use of this term can serve as evidence for the home of the "Common Books" (*CB*) that appear verbatim in both treatises as *NE* V-VII and *EE* IV-VI.¹ The standard reading, initially offered by Jaeger and defended in various forms by Rowe and others, argues that the *EE* does not distinguish between theoretical and practical wisdom, using *phronesis* and its cognates interchangeably for both concepts. The *NE* and the common books, they argue, do make this distinction, suggesting they constitute a single cohesive work.² Anthony Kenny argues instead that the *EE* does in fact distinguish between theoretical and practical wisdom, and that the common books fit the *EE* better than the *NE*.³

In this paper I want to approach this issue from a different angle, by focusing on *nous* (intellect) rather than *phronesis*.⁴ I argue that in the undisputed *NE* books there is a single part of the soul, *nous*, that is responsible for both thought and action. The view presented in the *CB* is more sophisticated than, and incompatible with, the *NE*. Finally, I conclude by noting how the *EE* agrees with the *CB*, and suggest that the received view of the relationship between Aristotle's ethical writings is thereby called into question.⁵

§2. Moral Psychology in the NE

To say that *nous* is theoretical is to say that *nous* is the part of the soul that engages in contemplation. To say that *nous* is practical is to say that *nous* is the part of the soul that makes decisions and gives commands to the lower parts of the soul. This way of speaking requires us to address a few preliminary issues about Aristotle's moral psychology.⁶

¹ In what follows, when I refer to the *NE*, I will mean only the undisputed books, I-IV and VIII-X. *EE* will likewise refer only to books I-III and VII-VIII, and *CB* to the shared books.

² Jaeger (1948), pp. 239-246, 434-452; Rowe (1971), pp. 63-76. Lloyd (1968) adopts this view without argument. See also Cooper (1981) and Irwin (1980).

³ Kenny (1979), pp. 161-189 and Kenny (1992) pp. 113-142. See also Allan (1966) and Jost (1983). Rist (1989), pp. 165-190, agrees with Kenny that the *CB* belong to the *EE*, but nonetheless argues that the *EE* is relatively early. But to maintain this thesis he is forced to dissolve the *NE* as we have, arguing that *NE* I and VIII-X were earlier, II-IV later, on the basis that *De anima* presents a new psychology that the *EE* agrees with.

He also stresses the similarities between the *Protrepticus* and *EE*, not noticing that the *NE* is closer to the *Protrepticus* on all the points he raises.

⁴ For an excellent and thorough study of *phronesis* in the *NE* and *EE*, see Monan (1968). In many ways the present paper can be taken as the beginning of a parallel to Monan's work.

⁵ We might also ask how the role of *nous* in the ethical treatises is related to the discussions of *nous praktikos* and *nous poetikos* in *De anima*. I unfortunately cannot address that issue in this paper, though I'll note that I'm in general agreement with Caston (1999) regarding *nous poetikos*.

⁶ The first question is whether it is acceptable to speak in terms of parts of the soul. Aristotle addresses this issue most explicitly in *NE* I.13, where he expresses some ambivalence about whether the soul has parts, strictly speaking, but he is willing to say that they are at least distinct in definition even if they are not literally separable (1101^a23-37). "Whether the soul is divisible like the parts of the body or as parts are in general, or whether the two parts are divisible in definition (*tōi logōi*) but inseparable by nature like the convex and concave aspects of a curve, does not

Aristotle tells us that the soul has two parts, one *alogon* (irrational) and one that has *logos* (reason) (1102^a26-28), citing “exoteric works” (*exōterikōis logois*) where this distinction has already been drawn. But in the following pages he eventually endorses a tripartite conception of the soul. The nutritive element is non-rational, and so set aside as not relevant to human happiness. A second part of the soul we can call *quasi-rational*. Aristotle waivers about where to put this part of the soul, saying that it is irrational yet in a sense shares in *logos* (1102^b13-14). This part is associated with emotion and desire (1102^b30-31) and is able to obey commands given to it. The *logos*-having part of the soul, on the other hand, is the part that “urges (*parakalei*) [one to act] rightly and toward the best things” (1102^b15-16), that is, the part that gives commands that the quasi-rational part can obey.

This position is adumbrated in *NE* I.7 where, in arguing that the happy life will be the activity of that part of the soul which humans do not share with plants or animals, Aristotle concludes that “what remains is a kind of activity (*praktikē*) of the part that has reason (*tou logou echontos*). Of this part, one element is such as to obey reason (*epipeithes logōi*), the other such as to have it and to think (*dianooumenon*)” (1098^a3-5). So already in *NE* I we have hints that there is a single part of the soul, the part *echon logon*, which can engage in both theoretical activity (by thinking) and practical activity (by commanding).⁷

§3. *Nous and Contemplation in the NE*

It is common knowledge to any student of Aristotle’s ethics that contemplation plays an important role in the treatise’s climax in *NE* X.6-8. But I want to start a bit earlier, with the discussion of friendship in *NE* IX. In a discussion of the value of friendship to the happy person

Life for animals is defined by the power (*dunamei*) of perception, and for humans by perception or intellect (*noēseōs*). And a power refers back to its activation (*energeian*); the authoritative part is in the activation. So the authoritative feature of life is perception or intellection (*noein*)” (1170^a16-19).

The thought here is the essential activity for humans follows from an earlier argument in Aristotle’s discussion of friendship, where in *NE* IX.4 Aristotle argues that the good person “gratifies his thinking element (*tou dianoētikou*), which each person seems to really be” (1166^a16-17) and “Each person would appear to be *nous*, or to be *nous* most of all” (1166^a22-23). In other words, the thing that each person essentially is also provides for each person’s characteristic activity. To be human is to be *nous* that engages in *noein*, an intellect that engages in intellection.

This view provides the foundation for *NE* X’s argument that the happy life is a life of contemplative activity or *theōretikē*. Aristotle begins his argument about contemplation constituting the happy life ambivalently:

Whether this is *nous* or something else which appears to rule and guide us by nature and to have be capable of thought (*ennoian echein*) about noble and divine things...this activity exercised according to its corresponding excellence would be complete happiness. That this is contemplation, has already be said. (1177^a13-18)

make a difference for present purposes.” (*NE* 1102^a28-32) Since our purposes largely are Aristotle’s purposes here, I will follow his lead in speaking in terms of distinct parts of the soul while remaining relatively silent on what kind of parts the souls are and how precisely they are related to one another and to the soul as a whole.

⁷ Aristotle shows us he aware of the word ‘*logos*’ carrying either connotation when he clarifies that the quasi-rational part of the soul has reason “the way we say that one ‘takes account’ (*echein logon*) of his father, not the way one takes account of mathematics” (1102^b31-3).

But he continues to refer to *nous* throughout this and the following chapters, making it clear that Aristotle in fact endorses the claim that it is *nous* and noetic activity that is most relevant to human happiness. The argument continues: “This activity is best (*kratistē*); for *nous* is the best of the things in us, and of knowable things *nous* is concerned with the best” (1177^a19-21; cf. 1177^b19-20). Hence *nous* is theoretical in the *NE*.

§4. *Nous* and Action in the *NE*

As I noted at the end of §2, the early book of the *NE* talks of the *logos*-having part of the soul, but there is little mention of *nous*. This pattern continues in *NE* III.1-5, where Aristotle discusses voluntary action and *prohairesis*, (decision or choice). Voluntary action and *prohairesis* share the feature that they require the *archē* or originating principle of movement of the action to reside in the agent herself (1110^a15-17, 1112^b31-33). But the domain of *prohairesis* is more limited, because *prohairesis* requires “involves reason and thought” (*meta logou kai dianoias*, 1112^a15-16) which not all voluntary action includes. We eventually learn that *prohairesis* results from deliberation about possible changes within our power (1112^a30-31, 1113^a9-11). The explanation for why we deliberate about things in our power is because “nature and necessity and chance are causes, but so too is *nous* and everything due to man” (1112^a31-33).⁸ Here Aristotle separates causes into two categories: nature, necessity, and chance are the causes of things we shouldn’t deliberate about, while *nous* is at least a cause of the things we should (i.e. our actions). Aristotle *might* mean *nous* in a generic sense, but we would expect him to use the term *logos* instead, as he had done in early chapters, if we were keen to avoid a more specific commitment.⁹

But to see the most explicit case for *nous* being a practical faculty, let us return to Aristotle’s discussion of friendship. Aristotle argues that there are two kinds of self-love, depending on which part of the soul is loved. Bad self-lovers “gratify their appetites and in general the emotional and irrational (*tōi alogōi*) parts of the soul” (1168^b19-21). But a good self-lover instead gratifies the “most authoritative part” (*tōi kuriōtatōi*), which is what the person really is, just like a city is identified with its most authoritative part (1168^b30-33). Moreover, Aristotle adds, whether or not someone is *enkratic* or *akratic* depends on whether “*nous* has control (*kratein*) or not, since this is what each person really is” (1168^b34-35). Aristotle goes on to say that the *enkratic* person is one who acts voluntarily done things “with *logos*” (1169^a1) while the *akratic* person is very different from the person who lives “according to *logos*” (1169^a4-6), hearkening back to the language of *NE* III. Aristotle concludes that the good person does what he ought, because “in all cases *nous* chooses (*hairetai*) what is best of itself, and the good person obeys his *nous*” (1169^b16-18).

We see the same position repeated in *NE* X. When Aristotle turns to *nous* and the contemplative life in X.7, he says that *nous* “appears to rule and guide us (*archein kai hēgeisthai*) by nature” (1177^a14-15). And he later repeats the claim that *nous* is “the authoritative (*kurion*) and best part” (1178^a3). And in his transition to politics in X.9, Aristotle says that a well-habituated person lives in accordance with “a kind of *nous* and right order” (1180^a17-18) that

⁸ For want its worth, three times in *NE* III (1110^a11, 1112^a21, 1115^b8-9) Aristotle talks about the standard of normal action as one who “has *nous*” (*ho nous exōn*). This expression may simply be a common idiom, so I’ll merely call it to attention rather than putting much weight on it.

⁹ The likelihood that Aristotle meant *nous* in the sense of a specific part of the soul is increased when we note that the rest of III.3 is spent comparing deliberation to other intellectual enterprises, including productive sciences (1112^a35-^b15) and mathematics (1112^b220-24).

comes from living under good laws, which themselves both “has compulsive power and is a rule from a kind of prudence (*phronēseōs*) and *nous*” (1180^a21-22).

Before moving on, let me address an objection. We might grant that there is both a theoretical *nous* and a practical *nous* in the *NE*, but denies that these are the same part of the soul. Rather, this objection reads the *NE* as positing two different kinds of *nous*: one kind is theoretical, the other practical.¹⁰ I concede that it wouldn’t be unusual for Aristotle to use an important technical term like *nous* in an equivocal way.¹¹ But this isn’t enough to make the objection successful. For Aristotle’s description of *nous* entails that it is a single part of the soul, two distinct parts. One of the central premises of the argument for the contemplative life is that each person is, strictly speaking, her *nous*, and so should lead a noetic life. But as we saw above Aristotle says each person is her *nous* both when talking about thought (1166^a16-17, 1166^a22-23, 1178^a6-7) and about action (1168^b31-33, 1168^b34-69^a3, 1178^a2-3). So if each person essentially is (i.e. is identical to) *A*, and each person essentially is *B*, then *A* must be quantitatively identical to *B*. Hence *nous* must be a single part of the soul in the *NE*, even if it has two distinct powers.

§5. *Nous* in the Common Books

In *CB* V/VI Aristotle discusses *nous* in more detail than anywhere in the undisputed *NE* or *EE*. It is clear in this book that there is a *nous* that is theoretical and a *nous* that is practical. But it is also clear that, unlike in the *NE*, Aristotle has two separate parts of the soul in mind here, not a single part with two faculties. Or so I’ll argue in this section.

CB V/VI starts where *NE* III leaves off: the soul can be divided into a part that has *logos* and a part that does not (1139^a3-5). Aristotle proposes to make a similar two-fold division in the *logos*-having part, “one by which we contemplate (*theōroumen*) the principles (*archai*) of the things that cannot change, and another [by which we contemplate the principles] of the things that can” (1139^a6-8). These two parts are labeled the *epistēmonikon* and the *logistikon*, respectively, although Aristotle quickly clarifies that by *logistikon* here he means deliberation (1139^a11-15).¹² So from the outset of the discussion we see two distinct psychic parts, a distinction Aristotle maintains when describing their functions.

Let us start with the *epistēmonikon*. Aristotle attributes three virtues to this part of the soul, *epistēmē*, *nous*, and *sophia*. The foundational concept here is *nous*, which is the faculty by which “we get the truth and are never deceived about things that cannot be otherwise and even about the things that can” (1141^a3-5); that is, it is the faculty which access the first principles or *archai* which are used in scientific demonstrations (1140^b31-41^a1, 1141^a7-8). *Epistēmē*, accordingly, is the faculty used in making those demonstrations (1139^b31-34), while *sophia* is the combination of *nous* and *epistēmē* vis-à-vis the highest things in nature, such as the eternal movement of the celestial bodies (1141^a18-20, 1141^b1-3), that is, the kind of activity discussed in *NE* X.7-8.¹³

The *logistikon*, on the other hand, has the practical virtues of *phronesis* and *technē*. These virtues correspond to a difference between doing and making, a distinction Aristotle is at pains to

¹⁰ Cooper (1975) raises this objection, though not quite in these terms (pp. 168-177).

¹¹ For instance, Aristotle called *phronesis* an intellectual virtue at 1103^a4-6, where it is contrasted with moral virtues that deal with physical states of the body (e.g. temperance with appetite, courage with fear). But he later says that *phronesis* is associated with the moral virtues, and is bound up with the body (1178^a16-22), in contrast with non-corporeal *nous*.

¹² Recall the distinction in obeying *logos* between listening to a father’s counsel and doing mathematics in *NE* I.13, 1102^b31-3.

¹³ *Sophia*, which requires *nous*, is the highest virtue of this part of the soul, so Aristotle will occasionally use the terms *sophia* and *nous* to refer to the *epistēmonikon*.

point out (1140^a1-6, ^a16-17, 1140^b3-4, ^b6-7). *Phronesis* is defined as “a state of practical truth, with *logos*, regarding human goods” (1140^b20-21). The notion of “practical truth” may strike us as odd, but it is the way Aristotle thinks about intellectual faculties: “The work of both intellectual parts of the soul (*tōn noētikōn moriōn*) is truth” (1139^a29-31), and “[the good state] for the practical intellectual part (*tou praktikou kai dianoētikou*) is truth in agreement with right desire” (1139^a29-31). It is this part of the soul that is responsible for *prohairesis*, which is here defined as “a *logos* and desire for the sake of something” which does not exist “without *nous* and thought (*dianoias*)” (1139^a32-34) and as “either desiderative *nous* or intellectual (*dianoētikē*) desire” (1139^b4-5). Despite this emphasis on truth, it is clear that “*phronesis* is practical” (1141^b21).

As these lines show, Aristotle discusses the *logistikon* in terms of *nous*, which might make us wonder whether these two parts of the soul are really that separate. Read in this light, *CB* V/VI does not look that different from the view in the *NE*. But diction notwithstanding, Aristotle is careful to mark a distinction between the intellectual and practical parts of the soul. To show this, I’ll make a two-stage argument: first, that V/VI posits two distinct parts of the soul, not one, and second, that each part has its own distinct capacities rather than sharing powers with the other.

The first stage of this argument rests on Aristotle’s comparison of the *phronesis* and (theoretical) *nous*. After making distinctions in kinds of *phronesis*, Aristotle argues

That *phronesis* is not *epistēmē* is clear. For it is about the particular, as has been said. For the thing to be done (*to prakton*) is this sort of thing. And it is opposite to (*antikeitai*) *nous*. For *nous* is of the limits, for which there is no *logos*, while it of the particular, of which there is not knowledge but rather perception. (1141^a23-27)

And we can tell from a later remark that Aristotle feels comfortable using the term *nous* to discuss *phronesis*:

Nous is concerned with both of the ultimate things. For there is a *nous* and not *logos* of the first limits and ultimates, and it operates according by demonstration from the unmoving limits and first things, while the one in action is of the limit and graspable thing, that is, of the other premise. (1143^a35-^b4)

This may not be the most transparent passage in Aristotle, but it is clear that (i) Aristotle will use the term *nous* to refer to more than one faculty, but (ii) these are nonetheless different faculties.¹⁴ He is, in fact, committed to making a distinction between these two parts, based on a principle he introduces at the very beginning of this discussion of the intellectual virtues: “Since the knowledge available to each stems from a kind of similarity and affinity, when objects are in different genera different parts of the soul will be naturally distinct in genus with respect to each of them” (1139^a8-11). And since eternal and contingent objects are different, the corresponding parts of the soul must be different.¹⁵

¹⁴ See also 1140^b25-28: “Since there are two *logos*-having parts of the soul, it [*phronesis*] would be the virtue of the other one, the one that forms opinions (*dokastikou*). For opinions are about the things that can be otherwise, and so is *phronesis*.”

¹⁵ But see Richardson Lear (2004), pp. 93-122 for a discussion of the similarities between theoretical and practical wisdom.

Since psychic faculties are distinguished by the different objects toward which they are oriented, it is no surprise to see that *nous* cannot command nor *phronesis* contemplate. This follows directly from the claim that *nous* is about the unchanging: action is causing a change, and *nous* involves what does not change, so *nous* does not involve action. But Aristotle also explicitly claims that theoretical *nous* is not practical. Here are three examples:

For the intellect (*dianoias*) that is theoretical (*theōretikēs*) and not practical or productive (*praktikēs mēde poiētikēs*) the good and bad is the truth and false (1139^a26-7)

Thought (*dianoia*) itself moves nothing, but the thought which has an aim and is practical does. For this is the source of production. (1139^a35-^a1)

For *sophia* would contemplate nothing from which human happiness will come (for none of the things [it contemplates] are generable) (1143^b18-20).

Aristotle is equally clear that action comes from *phronesis*:

The source (*archē*) of action is choice – from which comes movement but not the aim... (1139^a31-2)

For *phronesis* is commanding (*epitaktikē*), for the aim (*telos*) of it is what is to be done or not. (1143^a8)

For it [*phronesis*] issues orders for the sake of it [*sophia*], but not to it. (1145^a9)

All this shows that the view presented in *CB* V/VI is quite different from the view of the undisputed *NE*. While the *NE* gives both theoretical and practical powers to a single part of the soul, the *CB* view distributes these faculties among two distinct parts, *nous* and *phronesis* respectively. To that extent, the *CB* is incompatible with the *NE*.

§6. Conclusion

As I noted at the outset, debates about the chronological development of Aristotle's thought are closely intertwined with discussion of the role of the Common Books in the ethical treatises. But this debate has focused primarily on *phronesis* rather than *nous*, and has tended to take for granted that the Common Books belong in the *NE*. I've argued in this paper that the view of *nous* we get in the Common Books is actually inconsistent with that of the *NE*. This gives us some reason to think that the Common Books belong only in the *EE*. I don't have the space to make this further argument here, but I can at least point out that *EE* VIII.3 ends with the same view we saw in *CB* V/VI, that *phronesis* gives commands for the sake of *nous*. After arguing that there are two kinds of superiority (of the efficient and the final cause), Aristotle argues

Man is composed by nature of ruling and ruler parts, and each person should live according to the ruler (*archē*) of himself. But this is twofold: For the doctor is a ruler in one way, and health in another. And the former is for the sake of latter. So it is regarding our contemplative faculty (*theōrētikon*). For God does not rule by issues commands, but is that for the sake of which *phronesis* commands. (1249^b9-15)

Just like in the *CB*, here *phronesis* and *nous* play importantly distinct roles.

This suggests two points: (1) the *CB* belongs in the *EE*, but not in the *NE*, and (2) the *CB/EE* view is more sophisticated than the *NE* view, insofar as it distinguishes between importantly distinct capacities. So at the very least, the received view of the *NE*, *EE*, and *CB* needs more investigation.

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