

Ethical perception

Percepción ética

JESÚS MANUEL CONDERANA CERRILLO
Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca (España)

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ABSTRACT

Aristotle is one of the greatest advocates of the intensely examined research field referred to as «Virtue Ethics». This study belongs to this interpretative framework and focuses on the *judgment* regarding the particular in which the intellectual habits of judgment (γνώμη), understanding (σύνησις) and intuitive reason (νοῦς) intervene. A careful reading of the pages devoted to these virtues in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) confirms that Aristotle not only has a doctrine of *ethically relevant* perception but also one of *ethical* perception.

KEYWORDS

PERCEPTION; INTUITIVE REASON; JUDGMENT; PRUDENCE;
UNDERSTANDING.

RESUMEN

La denominada «Virtue Ethics», ámbito de investigación muy cultivado hoy día, tiene en Aristóteles uno de sus mejores valedores. La presente investigación se inscribe en este marco interpretativo y se centra en analizar el *juicio* sobre lo particular en el que intervienen los hábitos intelectuales de la comprensión (γνώμη), entendimiento (σύνησις) y la intuición (νοῦς). La atenta lectura de las páginas que le dedica el libro VI de la *Ética a Nicómaco* (NE) corrobora que Aristóteles cuenta, no solo con una doctrina de la percepción *éticamente relevante*, sino también con una doctrina de la percepción *ética*.

PALABRAS CLAVE

COMPRENSIÓN; ENTENDIMIENTO; INTUICIÓN; PERCEPCIÓN; PRUDENCIA.

I. INTRODUCTION¹

GOOD HUMAN ACTION demands three operations that rely on distinct virtues: (1) *looking for* the action that accomplishes (or contributes to accomplishing) a certain goal, for example, being generous. This action may be found (1.1) subtly, without searching for it, thanks to the virtue of εὐστοχία (skill in conjecture) or (1.2) through a more or less laborious search, by virtue of εὐβουλία, good deliberation. The second operation is (2) *judging* what has been found in the search (in order to either reject it, accept it and con-

¹ This article is the result of the research project «La comprensión vitoriana de la persona: estudio y edición del ms. 85/3, en relación con su obra y textos fundamentales de su escuela. Su proyección en materia económica. PID2021-126478NB-C21» (Vitorian understanding of the individual: study and edition of ms. 85/3 with regard to his work and fundamental texts of his school. Its projection in the economic area), funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation, Knowledge Generation Projects 2021, Undirected Research (PID2021-126478NB-C21) (2023-25).

tinue searching or accept it and judge that what was sought has been found). And third and finally, (3) putting into action what has been found. For this, a third act of practical reason is necessary: to *command* that the action be carried out effectively by virtue of *φρόνησις*, prudence.

This study focuses on the second operation: the *judgment* regarding the particular in which the intellectual habits of judgment (*γνώμη*), understanding (*σύνησις*) and intuitive reason (*νοῦς*) intervene.² Aristotle studied these habits in chapters 10 and 11 of book VI of the *NE*. The internal unity of these chapters is based on the connection between *φρόνησις* and these three habits (*ἔξεις*, *NE* VI, 11, 1143a 25) or capabilities (*δυνάμεις*, 1143a 28). They coincide with *φρόνησις* in their material object: they deal with the final determinations of the acts (*ἔσχατά*, 1143a 29. 35; *καθ' ἑκάστα*, 1143a 29; b 5). Yet they differ in their formal object: *σύνεσις*, *γνώμη* and *νοῦς* judge or discern (1143a 24) with respect to the last determinations of the acts, while *φρόνησις* is imperative (*ἐπιτακτική*, *NE* VI, 10, 1143a 8), that is, it effectively commands what to do here and now.

Aristotle spoke of habits or capacities, but as we will see, in these chapters the virtues (good habits) corresponding to these habits are properly studied. This is why Aristotle discussed, respectively, *εὐσινεσία* (*NE* VI, 10, 1142b 34) and *συγγνώμη* (*NE* VI, 11, 1143a 19. 24). Moreover, *νοῦς* is directly qualified as an intellectual virtue in *NE* VI, 6. Thanks to these three virtues and their reference to the specific, *φρόνησις* is constituted as the virtue governing the action, always with reference to a specific *hic et nunc*.

Ross' translation of the *NE* which we consider in this work, heads these two chapters with the title: «Minor intellectual virtues concerned with conduct». However, these studies highlight the *decisive importance* of these virtues which, appearing to be «minor», have rarely been studied (Louden, 1997, p. 107).

This research is also justified by the fact that these habits are not well understood. Thomas Aquinas considers them virtues (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 49, 2; 51, 3-4) but has adjusted their meaning by interpreting them as *potential parts of prudentia* (*σύνεσις* and *γνώμη*) or as a *quasi-integral* part (*νοῦς*). In this Thomistic scheme, *σύνεσις* is understood to be «sanity», a virtue regarding judgment in *ordinary* circumstances; and *γνώμη* is interpreted as «equitable resolution» under *extraordinary* circumstances. According to Aquinas, *νοῦς* (*intellectus*) is required for a perfect knowledge of what is to be done in the present. In a distinct way, Stewart emphasizes the link between *γνώμη* and *σύνεσις* with the virtue of justice. This link distorts the meaning of these habits that Aristotle explains in the context of *φρόνησις* (Stewart, 1892, pp. 89-90). Despite the scholarly study devoted to it by Gauthier-Jolif, *σύνεσις* is not «awareness» (Gauthier-Jolif, 1959, p.519, volume II, second part, books VI, 10). According to Natali, these habits are ways of knowing similar to the *φρόνησις* (Natali, 2017, p. 135). Finally, other interpretations consider *νοῦς* either as an act of intuition or as a faculty that intuit (Browne, 1895, p. 168, note «ee»; Grant, 1885, vol. II p.180; Martin, 1977, p. 17; Stewart, 1892, p. 51. 93). The present work will demonstrate that it is a good *habit* (a virtue) and not a *faculty* or the *act* of a faculty.³

² Regarding the translation of the Greek terms, Stewart's judgment is correct: «It is perhaps impossible to bring out in any single English word the whole meaning of this term [*γνώμη*]» (Stewart, 1892, p. 86; Zagal, 1999, p. 129, note 2). It is true that these Greek terms do not have precise translations in English or other language. Therefore, some translators leave these terms without being translated (Chase, 1937, vol. 144; G. Ramsauer, 1878, pp. 408-410).

The objective of this work is not to merely restore the original meaning to the two chapters under study, but also to show the relevance of having these three virtues of excellent (virtuous) human action. Our work is thus part of the current known as *Virtue Ethics*. Although Aristotle is its fundamental supporter, it extends beyond him since its conclusions are not limited merely to the ethics of *Aristotelian* virtue, but also to the *ethics of virtue itself*.

Therefore, we will first establish a general context and the immediate context of these two chapters. The above interpretative framework will allow us to adequately examine the object of each of the three virtues studied here, as well as their relationship with the set of virtues linked to prudence. Finally, we will see that the meaning of these three virtues proves that Aristotle has a doctrine of ethical perception, not merely a doctrine of perception with ethical relevance.

II. CONTEXT

It is well known that book VI of the *NE* examines the five intellectual virtues: (1) νοῦς or intelligence of the principles that are used by (2) ἐπιστήμη or science, understood as the knowledge founded precisely on those principles. Both create (3) σοφία or wisdom, which has, as its object, that which cannot be other than it is. Contrasting this area of the necessary is that which can be otherwise than it is. Here, two virtues arise: (4) τέχνη or virtue with respect to what is the object of production, whose criterion of truth is found in what is produced. Therefore, the best carpenter (the one having the best τέχνη) is the one who makes the best chair, where «best» is understood as «that complying with the function for which it has been made». This means that τέχνη is an intellectual virtue of means, not ends, since τέχνη acts by looking towards the established end, and not for itself. This is the area of production that the Greek refer to as ποίησις.

Something similar happens to the other virtue of the contingent realm: (5 and final) φρόνησις. It also establishes the ultimate goals of the action (*pace* Kolnai, 1977), and therefore is specifically concerned with the means to achieve man's ultimate goal. These means are the very actions. According to Aristotle: «For while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end» (*NE*, VI, 5, 1140b 6-7). There are two types of human action. There are actions that have physically different results from actions that achieve those results, as in the case of the carpenter's chair. The results of all of the arts belong to this area of action called «production» (ποίησις).

In Greek, human action is known as πράξις. It is the action whose *main* result is *immanent* to the subject. This means that the main result of the action consists of the modification (for better or for worse) of the nature of the subject performing it. Thus, one who helps another produces a certain effect on the world (satisfies his hunger, for example). But at the same time, this action has another and more important effect: it changes the subject acting in this manner by making him better, for example, inscribing the virtue of generosity in his nature. Although it is the most important and main result, it is not necessarily the one that the agent seeks. Pursuing the goodness of one's own character is not the objective of generous action. Aristotle is very aware of this when he notes that the end pursued by any virtuous action is pursued τοῦ καλοῦ ἕνεκα (*NE* III, 7, 1115b 12; IV, 1, 1120a 24-28; X, 9, 1180a 7). For example, a generous individual seeks to satisfy the hunger of a needy person, because creating this effect in the world is worthwhile since it is good in itself. The fact that this makes the person acting in this

³ The two main meanings of νοῦς are δύναμις and οὐσία (Greenwood, 1973, p. 153; Nuyens, 1948, pp. 310-312).

way good is not part of the perspective of the virtuous person, who is virtuous precisely for this reason.

In the action of giving (or not giving) to one who is truly in need, the important thing is not the result produced (the «resulting state of affairs»), but whether or not the ends inherent to the action itself are carried out (virtuous or vicious ends inherent in this action: certain ways of desiring and wanting that which is carried out). Therefore, going to the movies with a friend so that he will go with me when I ask him, creates a state of affairs in the world that can be «calculated» since it satisfies desires but does not result in the immanent good of friendship, which is to wish the best for the friend, for the friend himself. Therefore, this *properly* human action is πράξις, not ποίησις (Abbà, 1995, p. 200).⁴

Therefore, these intellectual virtues, referring to the judgment on the particular, are decisive. Indeed, the ultimate goal of man is carried out in virtuous action, «since happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue» (NE I, 13, 1102a 5). Human action occurs in the particularity of a *hic et nunc* delimited by unique circumstances for the subject who performs the action. Therefore, in order to achieve the true purpose of man, it is necessary to have φρόνησις, a virtue that precisely assigns the happy medium to the other ethical virtues.

III. INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES REFERRING TO THE DISCERNMENT OF THE PARTICULAR

Having established this general context, we move on to examine the immediate context of the two chapters that are the subject of this study. It is known that φρόνησις does not act on its own in the task of finding what needs to be done here and now in order to achieve εὐδαιμονία. It relies on four habits that are closely related to its task: εὐβουλία (chap. 9), σύνεσις (chap. 10), γνώμη (start of chap. 11, but studied specifically in NE V, 10) and νοῦς (studied in chap. 11).

These habits are closely related to the *main act of prudence* since they are concerned with the ultimate determinations of the acts, that is, of what is particular or individual in the action. And the main act of prudence is to command (ἐπιτακτική, NE VI, 10, 1143a 8) the operative powers so that the subject necessarily acts as the φρόνησις ordering *hinc et nunc*. In order for this main act to be carried out virtuously, two secondary acts are required, which are in the hands of four virtues.

These four virtues (εὐβουλία, σύνεσις, γνώμη and νοῦς) refer to the two secondary acts of prudence: (1) deliberating well (εὐβουλία) and (2) judging well. In this second case, there are two types of judgments that deal with (2.1) what others state that needs to be done. These «others» can advise about (2.1.1) what the law or customs say should be done in a specific case (γνώμη) or (2.1.2.) about what to do in especially complex circumstances (σύνησις). They may also refer to (2.2.) what the circumstances themselves advise on what to do (νοῦς).

This study does not focus on deliberation since this is aimed at *searching* for the relevant action in specific circumstances, not the *judgment* regarding these circumstances. Thus, εὐβουλία is a type of ζήτησις that is distinguished from the other three virtues that are forms of judgment.

III. 1. JUDGMENT (γνώμη) AND UNDERSTANDING (σύνησις)

⁴ Aristotelian ethics, thus understood, is somewhat distanced from utilitarian and deontological positions (Hursthouse, 2010).

Judgment (γνώμη) and understanding (σύνησις) constitute a genre, that of virtues that correctly judge what another says that an individual should do. This genre has two types: the γνώμη, which acts when this «other» is the νόμος. In this case, it is a judgment regarding the circumstances foreseen by the νόμος. And σύνησις operates when an individual (such as a friend) advises me on what to do in especially difficult or unique circumstances that cannot be foreseen by the νόμος which, given its own nature, deals with what occurs in most cases.

Clearly, γνώμη is essential for any individual and this may be seen by the dual insufficiency that is incurred by the νόμος. Firstly, the νόμος suffers from logical insufficiency: it is impossible to establish what should be done in each specific circumstance since the law cannot cover all of the innumerable potential circumstances arising from each action. In addition, practical insufficiency also exists since no rules exist for the application of the laws. Hence, the decisive relevance of γνώμη for the individual (Rivas, 2023, pp. 61-62) and ἐπιείκεια for the judge (NE V, 10, 1137b 20-27).

The purpose of understanding (σύνησις) is related to deliberation since σύνησις is the virtue by which an individual judges what to do based on the judgment of another advising him as to what to do in an especially difficult situation (NE VI, 10, 1143a 6-7). For example, when a friend advises me that, given the circumstances, it would be better for me to change my job. Listening to others is necessary since one is not necessarily a good judge in their own case (NE V, 4, 1132a 19-20) and acting in especially difficult situations requires deliberation. They should clearly be listened to, but one should not simply do whatever they tell us.

Therefore, this virtue should not be confused with docility, since docility assumes σύνησις. There are indeed certain circumstances that are especially complex in life. Should one change their job to take better care of his family at the risk of not taking good care of them because the salary will be much lower? Under these circumstances, it is necessary to carefully choose who will advise me. But even when trusting the judgment of the advisor, the decision should be taken by the individual, even if it is the decision to follow their advice. Docility consists of *following* good advice (after having judged it to be «good advice») precisely because it is good advice and for no other reason, and not to please the person who gave the advice.

Although σύνησις is a virtue integrated into φρόνησις, it differs from it. According to Aristotle: «practical wisdom issues commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done; but understanding (σύνησις) only judges (κριτική)» (NE VI, 10, 1143a 8-10). Therefore, σύνησις is an intellectual virtue because its own act is to judge, whereas φρόνησις is also an ethical virtue, given its connection with the ethical virtues, as examined in books II to V of the NE.

It may be suggested that, if the purpose of human behavior is to do good, it would be sufficient to follow the advice of one who is known to be good at something, just as someone who wants to be healthy should follow the advice of a physician who knows about health. Therefore, the patient heals by following the doctor's advice. However, this analogy between health and goodness is not entirely valid for several reasons. Firstly, moral goodness is not a «knowledge», or, in other words, it is not reduced to knowledge, but rather, it is a quality of character implying a firm determination to do what is good. Therefore, the good person does not always explain the content of moral goodness. Secondly, the physician does not need to be healthy in order to tell others how to improve their health. To the contrary, only the good person can know what is

truly good (*NE*, III, 5, 1114b 1-2; VI, 5). Finally, one maintains or improves their health by *following* a doctor's advice, *by their own decision*.

If this is the case, although it is necessary to listen to the advice of good people, especially in difficult situations, an individual must make his own decisions. To some extent, the individual is alone when it comes to choosing his own course of action.

III. 2. INTUITIVE REASON (νοῦς)

The second part of chapter 11 discusses νοῦς in a meaning having distinct connotations as compared to those discussed in *NE* VI, 6. Here, it discusses practical, particular νοῦς. The translation of this term in this context ranges from those translating it as if it were a faculty (intellect) or the act of a faculty (intuition) as we have already mentioned.⁵

Since it is not a faculty, the term «intellect» is not appropriate, and since it is not an act, it should not be identified with «intuition». The Aristotelian thesis claims that it is a virtue or a «[true] habit of the principles».⁶

It should be noted that the Aristotelian term has a less mechanical sense than that typically given to «habit» in technical contexts such as that of our culture. The Aristotelian habit is not a mechanism or device that automatically produces results. Those who understand virtue in this way tend to believe that its *main effect* is to facilitate good work. A good person carries out good acts without effort. This is not a proper representation. The *specific* operation of the virtuous habit does not consist of *facilitating* the good act, but rather, of *turning it into something good*. In this sense, the virtuous person is the measure of good. The fact that it is easy for him may be an indication of his goodness, but it is not the foundation of his character. For example, a generous person gives to whom he must, in a proper manner and offering an appropriate amount. The fact that he does this naturally, without effort and with joy, indicates that the generous person only sees that the work that he does is good and, therefore, he perceives the attractiveness of the good that is already inscribed within his character. He acts τοῦ καλοῦ ἕνεκα (*NE* III, 7, 1115b 12; IV, 1, 1120a 24-28; X, 9, 1180a 7). This is not at odds with the fact that it is often difficult to find and do what is good.

It should not be believed that νοῦς, as a habit of the principles, is a sort of «warehouse» where we store and from which we take the principles as if they were perfectly defined «axioms». Here, νοῦς implies the *progressive acquisition* of the principles (for this reason, a young person is not a good student for ethics but is a good student to understand the theoretical principles of mathematics). Since the acquisition of principles requires experience and their domain is experience (in continuous change), νοῦς implies acquisition and *reflective use* of the principles.

According to Aristotle, νοῦς is a good habit, a virtue. Aristotle spoke of εὐβουλία, εὐσυνεσία and συγγώμη, but not of εὖ-νοῦς. And for this same reason, we cannot refer to εὖ-φρόνησις since these terms already denote a *good* habit, or a ἀρετή. Like all intellectual virtues, νοῦς improves human intelligence in a certain area, in this case, the knowledge of the principles of action (the starting points of human action). And the starting points of the action are both the *first* principles (which in the action are the ends) and the *last* principles (which in the action are the circumstances in which those

⁵ Ross translates it as «Intuitive Reason» (Ross translation 2009, p. 107); Araujo-Marías, 1989: «intelecto»; Dirlmaier, 1991: «intuitive Verstand»; Natali, 1999: «intelletto»; Gauthier & Jolif, 1959: «intelligence».

⁶ *NE* VI, 2-3, 1139b 12-18 recognizes νοῦς as ἔξις (Barnes, 1993, pp. 260-261).

ends are to be carried out). Since this research deals with *particular* knowledge relating to action, it therefore examines this second type of knowledge. Therefore, the *voũς* that is considered here is a habit of the *practical* intellect.

It is not easy to coordinate the meanings of *voũς* in *NE* VI, 6 and 11. Chapter 6 does not tend to have interpretive difficulties or, at least, this appears to be the case. However, there is a proposition that tends to be overlooked by interpreters. According to this chapter:

If, then, the states of mind by which we have truth and are never deceived *about things invariable or even variable* are scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, and intuitive reason, and it cannot be any of the three (i.e. practical wisdom, scientific knowledge, or philosophic wisdom), the remaining alternative is that it is intuitive reason that grasps the first principles (*NE* VI, 6, 1141a 3-7).

According to the literal text reading, *voũς* is the form of knowledge by which we attain the truth and never deceive ourselves in the realm of principles *about things invariable or even variable*, according to Aristotle in 1141a 4.⁷ In the interpretation defended here, *voũς* refers to the two scopes of reality signaled in the introduction to this work: the theoretical and the practical. And this is the decisive connection with *voũς* that appears in chapter 11. To demonstrate that *voũς* refers to the two areas of reality already mentioned, we relate the cited text to this one from chapter 11:

(a) And intuitive reason is concerned with the ultimates in both directions; for both the first terms and the last are objects of intuitive reason and not of a rational account, (b) and the intuitive reason which is presupposed by demonstrations grasps the unchangeable and first terms, (c) while the intuitive reason involved in practical reasonings grasps the last and variable fact, i.e. the minor premiss. (d) For these variable facts are the starting points for the apprehension of the end, since the universals are reached from the particulars; (e) of these therefore we must have perception, and this perception is intuitive reason (*NE* VI, 11, 1143a 35-b5).

We have divided the text into five sections. Section «a» contains two affirmations referring to the two scopes of reality: *what cannot be* (theoretical) and *what can be otherwise* (practical). Section «b» refers only to the theoretical scope, section «c» refers to the practical one, section «d» speaks of induction as a *general* way of reaching principles and section «e» discusses *voũς* with reference to knowledge of the particular in the two scopes of reality.

The first affirmation of the text (section «a») sustains that *voũς* is exerted on the extreme limits (ἔσχατα) in both senses of reasoning.⁸ In fact, the upper limits of all reasoning are the principles (theoretical or practical). According to *NE* VI, 6, 1141a 6-7, neither σοφία nor φρόνησις are aimed at the principles. The lower limit of all reasoning is the singular. There is no reasoning on this last point either. For this reason, Aristotle speaks of «*voũς*» in both cases, since it is an issue of «immediate» knowledge in the sense that this knowledge cannot be justified by other prior knowledge. This would be the *general sense* of the term *voũς*. This *general* sense contains two distinct types since the knowledge of what is universal and foremost must be *specifically* different from what is particular and final. The universal principles in the area of πράξις are the virtuous ends, as discussed in the following text:

⁷ This proposition, decisive in this study, is not analyzed in highly reputable comments (Burnet, 1900; Dirlmeier, 1991; Gauthier & Jolif, 1959, p. 490, volume II, second part; Grant, 1885, p. 163, vol II; Greenwood, 1973; Natali, 1997, p. 506, note 597; Stewart, 1892).

⁸ *NE* III, 3, 1112b 33-1113a 2 confirms this affirmation by signaling two groups of different principles: universal and particular.

For virtue and vice respectively preserve and destroy the first principle, and in actions the final cause is the first principle, as the hypotheses are in mathematics; neither in that case is it reason that teaches the first principles, nor is it so here — virtue either natural or produced by habituation is what teaches right opinion about the first principle (*NE* VII, 8, 1151a 15-18).

Once again, this text presents the two areas in parallel (theoretical and practical).⁹ The ends are principles, but not in the same way as theoretical principles. Practical principles can be destroyed by vice (*NE*, VII, 8, 1151a 14-15), which is not the case with the principles of mathematics or physics, for example. Furthermore, the practical principles exercise the function of *final causes* in prudential deliberation. *De an.* III, 10 characterizes the desired object as an «immobile engine» of behavior: insofar as it moves without being moved, it is an *initial principle* of praxis.

IV. PERCEPTION WITH ETHICAL RELEVANCE

The theoretical and practical scopes are not completely parallel, however, and εὐβουλία is not the equivalent of ἐπιστήμη. In deduction, truth exists in each step since the next step follows from the previous one, which is the base of the same. Here the conclusion *necessarily* follows from the premises. In deliberation, however, there is a link between each step, however the next step is not contained in the previous one. Deliberation *helps* one to discover which relevant circumstances are to be considered, the appropriate means that are in our power, the feelings that we should express, etc. Realizing that action requires all of this, that we have already sufficiently deliberated (certain deliberations do not really have an end) or that the chosen means is truly within our power, is not a *necessary* consequence of the deliberation, but rather, an object of perception.¹⁰ Deliberation interweaves the perceptions that are provided by the γνώμη (for example, if under *these* circumstances *this* promise must be kept), σύνησις (for example, which part of a friend's advice should be taken into consideration) and νοῦς (for example, that now is the right time to do what has been decided on). The εὐβουλία is not reduced to these three dispositions, although it uses that which they provide with respect to knowledge of the particular as starting points (ἄρχαι). Thus, for example, σύνησις shows me that my friend is right when advising me that under these circumstances, I should take a risk and look for another job. This would be the starting point to continue deliberating. In other words, these three dispositions offer starting points (particular principles) for the deliberation so that, when taking them into account, it is possible to seek out the action that will achieve the end pursued by prudence in the here and now. It is up to prudence to *command*, that is, to *determine* that it is the here and now when one must do (or stop doing) something that has been found from the deliberation.

Why do φρόνησις and εὐβουλία, as part of it, need these three virtues? The φρόνησις is based on universal principles that are virtuous ends. And these practical principles, which are the ends, do not include all of the nuances that their *hic et nunc* application requires. Therefore, the virtue of courage (ἀνδρεία) demands that one «be brave». But can I achieve this virtuous goal if I am the last man standing on the battlefield? This is the starting point of ethical virtue that must become real in an action that

⁹ Some texts, in addition to the cited one, propose the analogy between the principles of science and the practical principles: *Eudemian Ethics* II, 10, 1227a 5-12; 11, 1227b 23-33 (Irwin, 1978, pp. 252-253. Leszl, 1990, pp. 65-118).

¹⁰ Martin, 1977, p. 17 argued against the interpretation made by Baumrin, 1968 and Jost, 1976 and would argue against what is offered here since «it tends to replace ethical deliberation with ethical «seeing», the active ethical agent with the passive ethical observer». The affirmations of Martin are sustained in a false characteristic attributed to intuition: being a type of passive «vision» that requires no investigative effort.

conforms to the *particular* nature of the subject and circumstances in which one acts (*NE* V, 10, 1137b 18-19). This explains Aristotle's insistence on the need for *φρόνησις* for the immediate apprehension of the particular (*NE* VI, 8, 1142a 27; 11, 1143b 3), which is its most characteristic feature (*NE* VI, 7, 1141b 14-16; 8, 1142a 15).

It may be argued that, at least in some cases, this perceptual knowledge of the particular is not necessary since, in some circumstances, the way to proceed is obvious. For instance:

Friendship implies helping your friend in need (general principle).

Your friend has financial difficulties (particular principle), then

Lend money to your friend now.

However, this reasoning is not obvious. It should be stressed that here too, *perception* is needed to recognize that *these* particular circumstances stated in the second premise are relevant in this case. Perception aims at realizing that no other circumstance negates the applicability of the first premise to the situation that my friend is in. Moreover, even if it is good to help him financially, one must deliberate as to how much money to give him, whether it should be a loan or a non-repayable donation. There are no rules for the application of these rules. Discernment «of the small» but not «unimportant» details of these virtues *is always necessary*.

Prudence requires the particular knowledge provided by these three virtues. But what is the nature of this particular knowledge? Let us now look at the text that examines the nature of the particular knowledge that is typical of prudence, materialized in the three virtues studied here:

Practical wisdom is concerned with the ultimate particular, which is the object not of scientific knowledge but of perception — not the perception of qualities peculiar to one sense but a perception akin to that by which we perceive that the particular figure before us is a triangle; for in that direction as well there will be a limit. But this [geometric perception] is rather perception than practical wisdom, though it is another kind¹¹ of perception than that of the qualities peculiar to each sense (*NE* VI, 8, 1142a 27-31).

Aristotle insists that *knowledge* of the particular is the main characteristic of prudence. This is precisely the purpose of the three dispositions studied here. In order to adequately outline the (material) object of these virtues, it is necessary to find out what this particular knowledge (material object) *is about*. To determine its formal object, it is necessary to know *what kind* of knowledge one has of that particular, which is the decisive question of this investigation.

The text states that the perception implied in the *φρόνησις* is one similar to that used in mathematics to perceive that a certain object is a triangle. Reference to mathematics has been made in two distinct reconstructions of the example (Burnet, 1900, p. 274; Gauthier & Jolif, 1959, p. 505; Greenwood, 1973, pp. 197-199; Natali, 1999, p. 508, note 618). Burnet considers that «triangle» is an example of the resolution of a problem: to divide a polygon into the simplest possible figures making it up. The simplest figure is the triangle, from which the polygon proposed as the problem is created or recreated. This explanation is not convincing since here, the «triangle» example is decisive since the simplest recti-linear shape is the triangle. However, there are other simple geometric shapes. The text discusses mathematics, not figures made up of

¹¹ We adopt the reading proposed by Burnet in 1900 and followed by, among others, Ross, Gauthier-Jolif II, 1959, *ad locum*, Engberg-Pedersen, 1983, p. 205, (Natali, 1999, p. 508, note 618) and Natali 1989, p. 179.

straight lines. This textual difficulty of the first interpretation is an advantage of the second, which admits any other geometric figure without difficulty.

For the second interpretation, prudence views the particular/individual in light of the end that it pursues, similarly to how mathematical perception views any individual entity as a mathematical entity. For example, the mathematical perception *views* a triangle at this spearhead, since it *sees* this spear in the light of the universal mathematic «geometric figure». Here, «to view» is to perceive: What is this perception *about*? What is the *subject matter* of this perception?

To respond to this question, it is useful to briefly recall the Aristotelian theory of perception. Distinctions should be made between the following:

(a) «Proper» or «special» sensibles (ἴδια αἰσθητά). They are the characteristic object of each sense, for example, color, sound, smell and taste.

(b) Common sensibles (κοινά αἰσθητά). They are perceived by all of the senses or by various ones, especially sight and touch. They are the shape, movement, rest, number and size (*De an.* II, 6, 418a 17-20; 425a 14-16; *De somn.* 1, 458b 4-6). The perception of a triangle (shape) in mathematics is the perception of the common sense. The shape is accessed through sight or touch.

(c) Accidental sensibles (κατὰ συμβεβηκός αἰσθητά), named as such in contrast to the two previous ones that are senses on their own. For example, a substance is recognized (Cleon's son) by the perception of its accidental qualities, the color white (Bravo, 1985, pp. 39-40).

NE VI, 8, 1142a 27-31 shows that the practical perception of the particular is an immediate knowledge similar to that of common sensibles. But the text, through the use of the term «akin» (οἷον: 1142a 28), remains generic. It is appropriate to clarify this doctrine by referring to what Aristotle states in *NE* III. Two examples allow us to specify the different types of prudential perception:

For the end cannot be a subject of deliberation, but only the means; nor indeed can the particular facts be a subject of it, e.g. whether this is bread or has been baked as it should; for these are matters of perception. If we are to be always deliberating, we shall have to go on to infinity (*NE* III, 3, 1112b 33-1113a 2).

The two proposed examples of perceptions (if this is bread and it has been well baked) are of distinct types. Knowing whether or not it is bread is an *accidental sensible*. Knowing if the bread is well baked is another distinct type of knowledge, the previous one as well as one of knowledge of proper and common sensibles, although it may involve all or some of these perceptions. «Being well cooked» is a resulting or consequential quality in Ross' language. In other words, it is a property held by virtue of having other properties (Ross, 1930 pp. 121. 138), some of which may be proper sensibles. In our case, an expert bread maker may (immediately) know that the bread in question is well cooked from its smell, taste, texture, color and even the characteristic sound that it makes when sliced. But he will be unable to justify his knowledge to anyone who requests incontrovertible reasons for his statement: it is a perception.

These examples, together with the commented text (*NE* VI, 8, 1142a 27-31), allow us to conclude that the particular perceptions that use prudence may be of all of the types recognized by Aristotle: proper, common, accidental sensibles and consequential qualities.

But one can argue the following: Whether or not it is bread, or whether or not the bread is well baked is not *formally* ethical knowledge. It falls within the scope of the baker's technique, which is independent of his virtuous or vicious character.

However, if the baker wants to sell this bread (πράξις), its being well or poorly baked is decisive, since, thanks to νοῦς, the *prudent* bread maker knows that this bread is not well baked and should not be sold, *precisely* because it is poorly baked. The bread maker's τέχνη must be subordinate to his πράξις. This is always governed by φρόνησις which require σύνεσις, γνώμη and νοῦς to be empowered. Therefore, it may be affirmed that Aristotle has a doctrine of perception with ethical relevance.

The above thesis can be qualified. The particular knowledge characteristic of prudence is *similar* to the knowledge by which one knows that bread is baked *properly*. It is significant that Aristotle used the same expression (ὥς δεῖ) to refer to bread that is baked «as it should be» and to each of the circumstances that make an action virtuous (for example, in *NE* II, 6, 1106b 20-22 and III, 10, 1118a 7-8). In other words, the characteristic perceptions used by prudence are those that *judge what is morally relevant* in the very thing being perceived. The particular known by the ἔξεις studied is not something that is «morally neutral», but rather, it is something that is *judged* in the light of the end that is reached by prudence. For this reason, Aristotle affirms the following:

it is not easy to define how, with whom, at what, and how long one should be angry, and at what point right action ceases and wrong begins. [...] How far, therefore, and how a man must stray before he becomes blameworthy, it is not easy to state in words; for the decision depends on the particular facts and on perception (*NE* IV, 5, 1126a 33-35. b 2-5; cf. II, 6, 1106b 21-23; 9, 1109a 24-30; b 20-23).

According to this text, perception is the criterion used to determine the relevant causes, the relevant circumstances to be taken into account and the passions appropriate to the moment in which one acts: φρόνησις exercises its power, its own act. The three dispositions studied provide a subject area that has already been *judged* based on the proper conduct that we must display.¹² This must be the case since the four types of objects stated are singular and are those considered by the ἔξεις that are studied here.

It has been stated that these ἔξεις perceive particular principles for deliberation such as «this bread is well baked», «this man is my father» or «in this difficult circumstance, the advice given by this friend is useful». At first glance, it does not appear that these judgments about perceptions may be correctly referred to as «ethical». They only acquire an ethical dimension when they *are situated in an ethical context*, for example, «following the advice of this friend will make me act morally well». Rather, these would be perceptions or judgments having *practical relevance*. If I am a bread maker, for example, the perception that «this bread is well baked» takes on moral significance because in this way, I can offer it to the public. When someone asks me why I answer that man's call, my behavior is explained if I answer: «he is my father». According to Martin, this explanation affirms the fact that Aristotle *only* has a doctrine of *sense* perception (with ethical relevance) and not a doctrine of *ethical* perception.¹³

V. CONCLUSION: ETHICAL PERCEPTION

¹² The cited text and our interpretation contradict Greenwood, 1973 pp. 197-199, Jost, 1976, 18 and Martin, 1977, 16, who do not admit the perception of the action to be performed (conclusion of the practical syllogism), but only of certain specific contents of the second premise.

¹³ Cf. Martin, 1977, p. 16. The idea appears to be taken from Greenwood, 1973, pp. 197-200, who sustains that the prudential perception is «precisely the same in kind as that operative in mathematics» (200).

But we must go beyond Martin since there are cases that refer to *ethical* perception in the sense that something is not perceived and is *then* placed in an ethical context. What is perceived is already perceived as something that *is* morally relevant. Irrational powers can only be updated in one way. Human senses are capacities of this type. On the other hand, rational powers update themselves in opposing directions and therefore, through training, acquiring habits that lead them towards the good or towards the bad. So, one can get used to reasoning badly if he does not train his reasoning ability (*NE* II, 1, 1103a 19-26; *Metaph.* IX, 2). The particular judgment capacity involved in the three ἔξεις examined is a rational power (δύναμις) that can be updated in opposing directions: it may be the *ability* to perceive everything that is morally remarkable in a situation or the *inability* to notice it.

In this explanatory context, it makes sense that Aristotle discusses whether these capacities to adequately discern circumstances are natural endowments (*NE* VI, 11, 1143b 7). It is clear that these three habits of the practical reason on which this research is based require experience and experience requires time. Therefore, as we are reminded in *NE* I, 3, young people are not good students of ethics because they lack life experience. Aristotle refers to the fact that young people lack the experience needed to become good friends, since friendship requires a lot of time and going through difficult situations that test its firmness and purity of intentions. Hence, only individuals of a certain age can acquire these three habits. This leads us to believe that these dispositions develop naturally with age (φυσικά *NE* VI, 11, 1143b 5). In this way, they *appear to be* natural, similar to that which occurs with physical strength. However, time is a *necessary but not a sufficient condition* for the acquisition of these three virtues. Confusion arises because, since reaching a certain age is a necessary condition (usually) to have these virtues, it appears that they are a consequence of time. But this is not the case. It is true that these habits are typical of those who have gained experience over time. But just like δύναμις, they must be shaped through practice, as habits at the service of good or evil.

The ability to see is a gift of nature. When looking at an x-ray, individuals «see» the same, but not all individuals «perceive» it in the same way. Only an expert discerns the important features of this image. This is an ability acquired through exercise. Something similar happens with ethical perception. From the beginning of conscious life, it is necessary to become accustomed to what is considered morally relevant.¹⁴

If one has good moral intentions (ends as principles of action) but lacks the ability to appropriately judge the circumstances to be taken into account for the action (formal purpose of the ἔξεις studied here) the same thing will happen as with a strong body that has vision defects: the stronger the individual (the more intense their intentions), the more damage that will be caused (*NE* VI, 13, 1144b 1-12). Three good habits of practical reason identified by Aristotle are necessary in order to correctly judge all that is relevant in a given situation in order to act correctly. Like good habits, they need time to be acquired. Therefore, Aristotle affirms that experienced individuals (the elderly and the prudent) are the ones possessing an excellent ability to see the circumstances and suitable means to carry out the virtuous intentions (*NE* VI, 11, 1143b 10-13; 12, 1144a 29-30; 13, 1144b 4-18; I, 6, 1096b 28-29).

The virtuous and the non-virtuous individual do not *perceive* a given situation in the same way since the same perception is ethically guided by acquired good habits that

¹⁴ For this reason, it is not possible to share Shiner's thesis, 1978, pp. 377-387, which considers Aristotelian αἴσθησις exclusively as a δύναμις.

judge, discriminate and discern the particular. What is important and decisive to one person may not be so to another. If these two individuals see another person tripping on the street, what one «perceives» (judges) as an opportunity to help, the other may view as a cause of laughter; the advanced age of the fallen person may be a cause of sorrow for one, while it goes completely unnoticed by the other. The two individuals in our example *would describe* the situation that they experienced differently. Aristotle summarizes these observations by stating the following:

Now someone may say that all men aim at the apparent good, but have no control over the appearance, but the end appears to each man in a form answering to his character. We reply that if each man is somehow responsible for his state of character, he will also be himself somehow responsible for the appearance (*NE* III, 5, 1114a 31-b 2).

Virtues exert a positive influence on particular practical reasoning. Instead of lowering the level of consciousness by encouraging routine behavior, they make reason receptive to all that is relevant for virtuous action. The prudent individual interprets and defines his own situation differently than the imprudent one, since he judges relevant circumstances that are missed or valued differently by the imprudent person.¹⁵ And clearly, mistakes can be made in numerous ways, but there is only one way to be correct: *NE* II, 6, 1106b 27-32 (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 97).

Therefore, it may be concluded that, perceptually speaking, the situations are not completely neutral. A prudent person is not only capable of *perceiving* the latest *ethically relevant* data; they can also *judge them appropriately*. A virtuous person and a vicious one do not perceive the same and judge differently. To the contrary, they neither perceive nor judge in the same way. Thus, it is affirmed that Aristotle also has a theory of *ethical* perception.

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¹⁵ Cf. *In E. N.*, III, lect. 13, § 515-516; *ST* I-II, 9, 2, 2m; 58, 5c; Abbà, 1989, pp. 250-251.

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Jesús Manuel Conderana Cerrillo es Profesor Titular de Historia de la Filosofía Antigua y Medieval en la Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca.

Líneas de investigación:

Ética aristotélica de la virtud.

Teoría de la persona.

Publicaciones recientes:

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Email: jmconderanace@upsa.es