

ARISTOTLE AND RICŒUR ON PRACTICAL REASON¹

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, such as it appears in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, detailing what sort of model to grasp practical reason it entails: a *practical wisdom*. Setting it against the backdrop of a reflection on the prevalent uses and meanings of reason today, and the consequences these views have for a depiction of selfhood and human action, the paper shows how, amid the contemporary revival of Aristotelian practical philosophy, Paul Ricœur updates this phronetic model in *Oneself as Another*. The paper discusses the implications of such a thick account of selfhood and human action, such as it being a potential key to overcome some difficulties caused by Kantian moral philosophy, while it also calls, with and beyond Ricœur, for a refinement of the phronetic model by taking into account not only its thick intersubjective grounding but also the limits to rationality and the need to take the plurality of life forms that can count as being examples of a ‘life worth living’ (a good life).

Keywords: Aristotle, *phronesis*, practical reason, Ricœur.

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Introduction

Discussion on the definition, aims, status and proper functioning of reason is a longstanding trait of Western thought. In a way, the task of defining what is specifically rational, circumscribing its scope and grasping it within a description of the allegedly rational ‘subject’ is almost coextensive with philosophy itself, in its difference with common sense or pre-philosophical (e.g. mythical) accounts of reality. Indeed, the history of philosophy, at least as we understand it within the Western tradition, is again and again traversed by the rational claim and its demarcation from (true or false) opinion, as well as by the association between reason and truth.

This is certainly a non-linear history, with many twists and turns. But it has had decisive historical moments of affirmation, not only in the Athens of Plato and Aristotle, but also in the modern philosophical landscape (e.g., the Cartesian newfound insistence on the rational method or the whole project of the Enlightenment, to name just the more famous examples) and, significantly, in the disciplinary breakoffs from philosophy such as modern science itself, with its exclusions of formal and final Aristotelian causality, and its insistence on objectivity. And it is worthy to mention that these breakoffs evidently include the formal birth of social sciences such as sociology, or behavioral sciences such as psychology, both heavily influenced, at the start, by the Positivist atmosphere of the late 19th Century. As such, one could say that in spite of its many twists and turns, at least until the 20th Century the theoretical emphasis on rationality was ever-growing, and one need only mention Hegelian philosophy to grasp its overarching expansion.

The result of this overabundance of rationality is, in my view, twofold. On the one hand, the prestige of so-called rational methods that were the result of the modern project paradoxically gave way to a reductionist understanding of what counts as “rational”, identifying it either with the results of technoscience or, in the domain of human action, with self-interested behavior (namely within mainstream economics), and thus obnubilating the semantic and philosophical polysemy of this notion and more particularly the forms of reason associated with the Humanities. On the other hand, the very way in which reason came to be understood after Modernity, the vocabulary and specific viewpoint adopted thereafter, widened the hermeneutic gap separating us from the Greek philosophers of Antiquity and worsened our real chances of grasping their worldview and the significance of their philosophical landscape.

At the same time, the difficulties encountered by the modern project and the critiques it has been subjected to in the 20th Century not only had an alleged ‘Postmodernity’ as its alternative; on the contrary, several meaningful revivals of pre-Modern philosophy took place. In this article, I want to look at a particular revival, that of practical philosophy under the guise of neo-Aristotelianism. More specifically, I will discuss the significance of practical reason in Aristotle and the reception it has had in the ethics of 20th Century French philosopher Paul Ricœur as a way to solve some of the impasses within modern moral philosophy, and namely moral Kantianism.

Thus in the first section I present in some length Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* such as it appears in book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*², showing its specific epistemic status, the relation between wisdom and reasoning, and what this means for the ethical agent. In the second section of this paper I start by briefly mentioning the neo-Aristotelian revival in practical philosophy in several authors, and then move to one specific author, Paul Ricœur, who, in *Oneself as Another*³, gives center stage to *phronesis* and tries to actualize it within an intersubjective and argumentative framework. Finally, in my very brief last section I pinpoint some of the limits and critiques that can be put forward to the notion of *phronesis* itself.

I – Aristotle’s phronetic model

There is a thread running through the history of philosophy and which distinguishes between theoretical and practical reasoning. In Aristotelian terms, given that human beings are ‘rational animals’, we possess two parts of our ‘soul’: one irrational and the other rational, while the latter is subdivided in two other parts. Accordingly, the part ruled by theoretical reason is dedicated to contemplating that which is unchangeable, while practical reason occupies itself with what is changeable and dependent on human choice. Now, the consequences of this distinction are twofold: on the one hand, not everything can be subject to deliberation, for “no one *deliberates* about the past, but about what is future and contingent” (Aristotle 1984: 1139 b 6-7); but on the other hand, what is future, contingent and dependent on the outcome of human action can indeed be subject to the deliberation that is a feature of practical reasoning.

² Aristotle 1984.

³ Ricœur 1992.

This distinction is of the utmost importance for two different, and yet closely related domains of human action, those dealing with ethics and politics. Indeed, what we find in Aristotle's practical philosophy is a discussion of good and bad choices according to the specific excellences – be it moral virtues or, more broadly speaking, the excellences (*aretai*) pertaining to the superlative fulfilling of a specific function, e.g. the shoemaker's excellence consists in making excellent shoes – that can be attributed to human action. But this also clearly entails a discussion on how 'objective' these reasoned choices (or, in a slightly different vocabulary, 'rational decisions') can be. Or, put otherwise, can one hope for the same degree of certainty when deliberating over one's course of action that can be expected in the domain of theoretical (scientific) reason? Clearly, for Aristotle, the answer to this question is no. But this position does not hold in many instances of later practical philosophies, especially in Modern philosophy. To mention only one notable example: when devising his moral philosophy, Kant attached to his description of the rational 'kingdom of ends', with obedience to duty (as the fulfillment of the moral ought) as the touchstone of moral action, a specific certainty on the 'simplicity of duty'. Which is to say, at any given point it would be simple to discern what is the 'right thing to do', i.e., one's duty – whether one actually did the right thing, even against one's wellbeing or desires, that was a different question.

It goes without saying that to a large extent Modern philosophy was pervaded by reductionist and/or objectivistic accounts of human behavior, in what was sometimes read as a consequence of the scientific turn – as if what can be measured, calculated and given an objective form would apply equally both to theoretical and to practical reasoning. But this poses very specific problems, especially if we run into the empirical difficulties of determining the best course of action in any given 'hard' situation, i.e., a situation in which there is no optimal outcome because the choice is not between morally qualified good and bad consequences, but between 'the bad and the worse'.

This is one of the reasons why, as we shall see in the next section, recent decades have seen some sort of 'Aristotelian revival' in practical philosophy, ranging from so-called 'virtue ethics' to communitarian substantive accounts of the 'good' in political philosophy, as well as 'phronetic' contextual accounts of what is at stake in human decision-making. In this paper, I am mainly focusing on this latter aspect. Before delving on some of the aspects of this contemporary retrieval of Aristotelian practical philosophy it is therefore

important to briefly recall what is at stake in Aristotle's 'phronetic model', especially as it appears in book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Phronesis is usually translated as 'practical reasoning' or 'practical wisdom'. Both translations point to aspects of this operation that are different, yet closely intertwined. For *phronesis* indeed entails some kind of reasoning, the one that follows from deliberation. However, this is not some sort of abstract, detached reasoning that would mainly apply to itself (like a pure theoretical exercise with no end in sight) or to its object (whether a physical object as the result of a given production technique, or a theoretical, e.g. mathematical, object); insofar as it pertains to *praxis*, to action, it is closely related to the agent that puts it forward. As such, the one who is capable of *phronesis* undergoes a qualitative change in his or her own being: he becomes wise (*phronimos*). And indeed in that specific sense, *phronesis* is the exercise (and consequence, as a result of reiterated repetition) of some sort of practical wisdom.

In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle ties practical wisdom not to this or that particular goal but to the overall aim of living a good life: "it is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general." (1140 a 25-27). What is clear, then, is that phronetic reasoning seems not to be instrumental for a specific goal, given that "good action itself is its end" (1140 b 5-6). Aristotle gives the example of Pericles who not only sees what is good for himself, but also good "for men in general" (1140 b 10).

A question still remains though as to whether this implies an essentialist take on human beings: i.e., whether there would be some things equally good for all human beings in general. There are reasons to believe that Aristotle was close to upholding such a view when spelling out the ideal of the 'good life', i.e., happiness or 'flourishing' as being connected to the exercise of given virtues: insofar as temperance, courage, etc., are good 'in general' and a 'mean' between bad extremes, they are supposed to be good for every human being. And it goes without saying that some 'goods' would be intrinsic to humankind, whether they would be biological (health), material (a certain amount of wealth) or even immaterial / relational (friendship). But on the other hand it is not at all clear that what it takes to 'flourish' or even the specific content of the 'good life' should be exactly the same for each and every one of us.

What is clear is that the kind of deliberation entailed in practical wisdom has a specific epistemic status: it is “the excellence (...) of that part [of the soul] which forms opinions; for opinion is about what can be otherwise, and so is practical wisdom” (1140 b 25-30). This excellence of opinion on how to deliberate on those things that depend on the good choice of action must then also be, to say it using the contemporary lingo, context sensitive. Aristotle states that *phronesis* is not only concerned with universals (which would be the case of theoretical wisdom) but also with particulars (1141 b 15-16); because practice needs to delve on particulars and this is why the *phronimos* needs experience and also to rely on experience to pass judgment. Thus, Aristotle contends, it is hard for a young man to have practical wisdom, for “it is length of time that gives experience” (1142 a 15). So, for Aristotle, someone young can excel at the purely theoretical endeavors, such as mathematics, but will hardly do so as a natural scientist (for this requires observation and experience) or, a fortiori, in the daily decisions required by practical wisdom. Conversely, the opinions of “experienced older people” should, according to Aristotle, be taken stock of “because experience has given them an eye they see aright” (1143 b 13-14).

Aristotle makes this clear at a theoretical level when he holds that there is a difference between enquiry in general and deliberation, because deliberation is a particular kind of enquiry (1142 a 30). And excellence in deliberation involves reasoning (and thus the connection between practical reasoning and practical wisdom alluded to above), one that entails a certain form of ‘correctness’ (1142 b 16). According to Aristotle, excellence in deliberation can be of two sorts, the unqualified sense (e.g. to ends in general) or to a particular end. Accordingly, practical wisdom entails an excellence in deliberation concerning the specific ends⁴ towards which it tends (1142 b 30-35).

Nevertheless, *phronesis* is more than understanding because understanding only judges, while practical wisdom “issues commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done” (1142 a 8-9). Aristotle does not ignore that there is a number of difficulties in this depiction; for instance, practical wisdom does not, as such, achieve a concrete outcome as the result of the application of a technique, like for instance medicine produces health; it is also unclear whether one needs to be wise to attain the results that practical wisdom procures, or whether one can just obey

⁴ On the relation between means and ends in connection with Aristotle’s phronetical model, see Angioni 2009.

someone who is wise (1143 b 30-35). Nevertheless, Aristotle contends that not only practical wisdom, as an excellence of one part of the soul, is good in itself, but also that it is tied to happiness “as health produces health” given that “by being possessed and by actualizing itself it makes a man happy” (1144 a 5), which is to say: s/he who possesses the virtues and constantly reiterates them wisely in a continuous exercise is happy, i.e. flourishes. Or as Aristotle puts it “the function of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral excellence; for excellence makes the aim right, and practical wisdom the things leading to it” (1144 a 6-9). I will come back to this “function of man” on the third section below. In a nutshell, Aristotle does not contend that all excellences are forms of practical wisdom (and he reproaches Socrates for allegedly holding this position) but he does say (crediting Socrates for that) that the excellences imply practical wisdom (1144 b 20), for practical reason is the ‘right reason’ for practical matters.

What is further argued, as should already be clear from the stated above, is that there is a co-dependence between goodness (moral excellence) and practical wisdom for excellence needs the “eye of the soul” (1144 a 29) of *phronesis* in order to be attained. The metaphor of the eye is here important, but it should not blind us to the fact that *phronesis* also involves a sense of touch, that is, a certain ‘tact’ (Contreras Tasso 2011) that is exploratory in nature. Moreover, this embodied, corporeal dimension of the interpretation of one’s surroundings and of the orientation of action is also very important for the hermeneutics of selfhood and even to what Richard Kearney calls ‘carnal hermeneutics’ (Kearney 2015).

In this short section we have thus seen several traits of Aristotle’s phronetic model. Before moving to the next section, allow me to summarize them. For Aristotle, *phronesis*: 1) is a sort of reasoning that mainly applies to praxis, and to particulars, applying deliberation to things that are contingent; 2) it is necessary to attain the several excellences that make a good or virtuous life; 3) its main domain of application is the individual life in its quest for happiness or flourishing but this is connected to an overall goal that is tied to a “function of man” and that somehow exceeds the individual; 4) it is a capacity unfolding through time and experience and fundamentally changing s/he who practices it through a continuous exercise; 5) there is no absolute certainty on its results because, unlike theoretical (scientific) reason, its epistemic status is that of a reasoned opinion; 6) its particular form of reasoning implies a discernment that is sensitive to context.

These last traits actually reveal something that Aristotle does not clearly emphasize but that should be taken stock of. As Attic tragedies masterfully showed, and as someone such as Martha Nussbaum so clearly spelled out, there is a “fragility of goodness”. And this fragility is also tied to the epistemic status that can be granted to the results of practical wisdom, and which are far from what could be expected after the dawn of Modern philosophy. But perhaps this fragility of goodness and the tentative status of practical wisdom are just a more accurate description of the ‘human condition’ (let us forget for a moment the parlance of something such as a ‘human essence’), its finitude, and the uncertain results of action, including ethically qualified action. But this, of course, is at odds with most Modern moral philosophies. While I cannot, in this article, recall all these traits, it will be useful, in the next section, to see how the phronetic model resurfaces in the ethics of Paul Ricœur, precisely as a way to solve the impasses of one notable instance of a Modern moral philosophy: Kant’s deontological model.

II – Practical Wisdom in Ricœur’s ‘Little Ethics’

Aristotelian practical philosophy has received a renewed interest since the second half of the 20th Century, both in Anglophone and Continental philosophy. Authors such as Elizabeth Anscombe⁵, Martha Nussbaum⁶, Alasdair MacIntyre⁷, Charles Taylor⁸ and Paul Ricœur, to name only some of the most prominent figures of this wave of neo-Aristotelian inspiration, have all contributed to emphasize important aspects in which Aristotle (sometimes in tandem with Hegel, most notably in Taylor and Ricœur) seems to offer more promising solutions for devising an ethical theory than the dominant Kantian or Utilitarian approaches to ethics. While it is impossible, in this short piece, to assess all these contributions, I choose Paul Ricœur’s for two basic reasons: first, because his Aristotelian response is directly tied to an honest assessment of one notable strand of Modern moral philosophy; second, because his response, and unlike many other neo-Aristotelian ‘virtue theories’ or ‘virtue ethics’ that are to be found nowadays, gives *phronesis* center stage⁹.

⁵ See Cadilha 2020.

⁶ Nussbaum 2013.

⁷ MacIntyre 2007.

⁸ Taylor 1989.

⁹ On Ricœur’s recovery of Aristotelian *phronesis* in his proposal of a “practical wisdom” see Portocarrero 2011, Galindo 2013, Zarauza 2013.

To be sure, Ricœur's most important contribution to the revival of Aristotelian ethics is to be found in the studies 7, 8 and 9 of *Oneself as Another*, which constitute what Ricœur himself dubbed his "little ethics". The humble title notwithstanding, this attempt at putting forward an ethical theory is an ambitious effort to reconcile two very different – and more often than not seem as irreconcilable – ethical standpoints, the teleological and the deontological, Kant and Aristotle. This 'little ethics', in turn, is only a part – even though it comprises roughly a third of the book – of the overall project of *Oneself as Another*, which is an essay in fundamental anthropology that aims at establishing a list of fundamental capacities pertaining to the human being, in what Ricœur dubs an "ontology of attestation". These three studies only deal with the capacity of the self to be imputable, i.e., to be responsible for ethical action (or the lack thereof), whereas in the previous studies the capacities to speak, act, and narrate are scrutinized. More specifically, in these studies Ricœur analyzes the attribution of the predicates 'good' and 'obligatory' to action.

In Ricœur's model, ethics is the (Aristotelian) domain of the aim for an accomplished life, while morality is the articulation of this aim in norms that strive for universality and have an effect of constraint (i.e. they determine what is permitted and even obligatory, and what is forbidden)¹⁰. Ricœur's effort is one of filling the gaps between the teleological and the deontological standpoints to devise a more comprehensive ethical theory, one that can take stock of both the aspirational and the normative components of a sound ethical theory while also opening for the intricacies and case-by-case decisions demanded by 'hard cases' and applied ethics, i.e. those that demand special attention and an invention of solutions in which a rule is somehow invented while the case itself is being solved. To this decision-making taking place in a thick evaluative context Ricœur calls 'situated judgment' and, in devising its model, he borrows the Aristotelian phronetic model while at the same time gearing it towards a more intersubjective framework, through a reinterpretation of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* (the thick 'ethical life' of a whole people or community, composed of its customs, habits, ingrained practices and traditions) and of a discourse ethics such as it appears in Apel and Habermas.

As it now is becoming apparent, this is a complex model with several influences, and it is not possible to comment on all of its details here. But

¹⁰ Ricœur 1992: 170.

allow me to unpack its main traits, with an emphasis on how the phronetic model appears at a pivotal point in the argument and how Aristotle's *phronesis* is both recovered and expanded in this movement. The framework of Ricœur's little ethics basically entails three main claims¹¹: 1) There is a primacy of ethics over morality, i.e., of the 'ethical aim' over the norm; however, 2) the ethical aim needs to pass through the sieve of the norm with its formal constraints of universalization and constraint ruled by the duty to obey the moral law; and 3) when the universal application of the norm runs into trouble and can no longer be blindly followed because it is faced with aporetic situations, then the norm can go back to the aim (and, as we shall see, to the claims underlying its basic convictions) to try to solve the conundrum. Let us see each of these moments in a little more detail.

Ricœur defines the ethical aim (or intention) as "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others in just institutions"¹². Following his claim on the primacy of the ethical aim, we can thus say that his starting point is Aristotelian, insofar as the eudemonic quest for the good life appears as the first ethical worry, and also as the overarching standpoint, given that the deontological passage is just a 'moment' in the architecture of this ethical framework. Moreover, the theory of selfhood put forward in *Oneself as Another* is intrinsically dialogic, intersubjective, as the self is always understood against the backdrop of the capacities and practices that constitute him or herself in interaction with others. Therefore, the attribution of the predicate 'good' to action (in interaction with others) is of the utmost importance, in that it is through a very specific type of action that some feelings that are fundamental for the development of the self (and for the establishment of sound relations with others) unfold. This is the case of self-esteem and solicitude (care) for others.

Thus, for Ricœur, following Aristotle, the 'good life' is to be sought after in praxis¹³. Importantly, Ricœur sees in the Aristotelian model a close tie between *phronesis* and s/he who holds it, the *phronimos*: "a tie that becomes meaningful only if the man of wise judgment determines at the same time the rule and the case, by grasping the situation in its singularity"¹⁴. At this point, we might ask: why does Ricœur, who holds such an Aristotelian viewpoint,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.: 172.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 175.

deem it necessary to resort to Kant? The answer lies in the fact that the ethical aim must undergo critique and the difficulties of instantiation in practice. For Ricœur, at the start, the aim and solicitude are ‘innocent’, ‘naïve’: “with respect to its content, the ‘good life’ is, for each of us, the nebulous of ideals and dreams of achievements with regard to which a life is held to be more or less fulfilled or unfulfilled”¹⁵. A fit between the preferential choices applied to action and this nebulous ideal is therefore constantly sought after; but in order for this to take place an exercise of interpretation is always called for. It is important to note, following Ricœur¹⁶, that the epistemic status of the verification of the fit between the life plans (the concrete content of the projected aim for the good life) and the daily choice of practices devised to follow that plan is that of ‘experiential evidence’; i.e., this is precisely an interpretation and not the sort of evidence to be expected from experimental sciences; and this interpretation in turn becomes, in Ricœur’s ontology, a moment of ‘attestation’: through this interpretation, the self checks whether or not s/he might be on the right track in his or her provisional approximation to living well.

Nevertheless, this assessment of the ethical aim would for Ricœur be incomplete without the test of universalization and constraint demanded by the moral norm. By that Ricœur means the passage through a different ethical universe, that of Kantian moral philosophy. Indeed, for Ricœur the passage of the ethical aim through the moral norm actually enriches it – this passage forces the aim to confront itself with other possible ethical aims (those held by other selves) and poses the possibility of evil, of what should be avoided and is forbidden. Accordingly, after the ethical aim and its component of solicitude are transformed by the deontological moment, naïve (let us call it “first degree”) solicitude becomes a critical solicitude that is able to discern the best tentative solution in the cases of conflicts of duties. And this is when the phronetic model reappears.

Ricœur disagrees with Kant’s claim on the simplicity of duty. Analyzing the several formulations of the categorical imperative he asks: to what or to whom do we owe respect? Is it primarily to the moral law in its universality, or to the concrete persons that are at any given moment at stake? Contrary to Kant’s thesis on the simplicity of duty, Ricœur contends that the categorical

¹⁵ Ibid.: 179.

¹⁶ Ibid.: 180.

imperative itself generates a multiplicity of rules¹⁷ that might clash among themselves, for instance when one is put in a situation in which to obey one rule necessarily involves disregarding a different rule – a situation that might become tragic when one of the duties at stake stems from the demands of otherness, i.e., from the solicitude to other people.

This much becomes apparent in the interlude to the ninth study of *Oneself as Another*, interlude to which Ricœur significantly calls “Tragic Action” and that is put under the banner of Antigone. That the example is borrowed from Greek tragedy is not by chance, for Ricœur believes that tragedy can be a source for philosophy to meditate, in spite of it not being philosophy itself. He thus refers to the “instruction of ethics by tragedy”¹⁸, claiming that “tragic wisdom carries practical wisdom back to the test of moral judgment in situation alone”¹⁹. Accordingly, what Ricœur takes from Sophocles’ *Antigone* is the following: Antigone is placed at a tragic junction precisely because, one way or another, she will be disrespecting a specific duty emanating from a fully binding law. On the one hand, she is called upon by custom and divine law to give her brother a sepulcher even though he has become an enemy of the city. On the other hand, she is enjoined by positive law to obey Creon who, as a sitting ruler, forbids his burial.

It goes without saying that *Antigone* poses a complex problem that cannot be reduced to a sober moral deliberation on preferable choice, insofar as a theology of divine blindness is interwoven with the claim that both Creon and Antigone make of being responsible for their own acts²⁰. The passions involved, with their irreducible component of irrationality, and Antigone’s tragic fate itself, are there to remind us that what is at stake in Tragedy itself cannot be entirely captured by means of philosophical deliberation alone. And yet, Ricœur contends, *Antigone* teaches us something about the “unavoidable nature of conflict in moral life”²¹ and, in its tragic wisdom, already points us to the necessary existence of moral conflicts which the formalism of the Kantian deontological moment cannot by itself solve. For Ricœur, following George Steiner, *Antigone* reminds us the “agonistic ground of human experience”²².

¹⁷ Ibid.: 262.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 241.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.: 242.

²¹ Ibid.: 243.

²² Ibid.

When faced with these hard cases, in which, for instance, respect for a formal law and solicitude for a concrete person are at odds²³ Ricœur seems to contend, as a rule of thumb, that respect is due first and foremost to persons, and not to the formal law itself. However, in such hard cases, he asserts that “practical wisdom consists here in inventing just behavior suited to the singular nature of the case”²⁴ but with a caveat: that this behavior is not simply arbitrary²⁵. On the contrary, in the phronetic model that Ricœur will borrow from Aristotle and update in his own fashion, the rule will stem from the particular case (as in the case of reflective judgment) in what Ricœur will define as the moral judgment in situation. And in this Ricœur will rely on a dialectic between the ethics of argumentation and considered convictions²⁶.

Ricœur maintains that the horizon of *phronesis* is the good life of the *phronimos*, by means of deliberation, and applied to singular situations²⁷. However, this *phronesis* is to be exercised in specific contexts that are thick, i.e., that have to take into stock existing customs and practices, and the argumentation of considered convictions in intersubjective exchanges and debate. Ricœur contends that “it is through public debate, friendly discussion and shared convictions that moral judgment in situation is formed”²⁸. In other words: for Ricœur no one can be wise alone; we could say, updating Aristotle’s terminology, that for Ricœur *phronesis* is a dialogic virtue in which it is the thick context provided by the concrete situation and the interaction with others that makes a wise deliberation possible. In hard cases, it is wise to seek advice and to mediate considered convictions through reasoned exchange.

Therefore, as we can see, in the development of his phronetic model Ricœur comes back to Aristotle after traversing Kant’s moral philosophy, but the model he develops conciliates the Aristotelian inspiration with a more intersubjective and argumentative model of deliberation. This model seems more feasible than a blind application of moral rules supposed to be both

²³ To give only one example: should the moral demand to tell the truth apply universally, including to patients who are dying, even if this makes their suffering more acute? In this case the sheer respect for the law seems to be in conflict with solicitude for the wellbeing of the person. (See Ricœur 1992: 269)

²⁴ Ibid.: 269.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.: 289.

²⁷ Ibid.: 290.

²⁸ Ibid.

universal and simple. But it is also not without a fair share of perplexities and difficulties. In my very brief last section I pinpoint two of them.

III – Critical Remarks

In this paper I have shown how a contemporary recovery of Aristotelian *phronesis* is useful to go beyond some of the difficulties presented by Kantian moral philosophy, and that Ricœur’s attempt provides us with a more intersubjective phronetic model within the context of his fundamental anthropology. Devising such an ethical theory has important implications for the way moral agents – i. e., to use the modern vocabulary, the ‘subjects’ or ‘selves’ that underlie ethical action – are conceived. For instance, if we consider that in the Aristotelian framework, praxis fundamentally changes agents themselves and thus that the end goal is the development or flourishing of human beings, it is easy to conclude that what we find here are thick accounts of subjectivity and identity. In a way, this is very different from the standard accounts of selfhood put forward by deontological liberalism in the 20th Century, in the wake of John Rawls²⁹ post-Kantian moral philosophy. As such, the Aristotelian revival connects to communitarian critiques of that standpoint, such as Michael Sandel’s³⁰. However, some problems with this account remain, and I will emphasize two: essentialism and the status of rationality in human action.

Throughout the paper I highlighted that in the backdrop of Aristotle’s theory there lurks an essentialist presupposition. However, this is evidently problematic. It is not clear that human beings have immutable “essences” or that there is something such as a specific “function” or “task” for humankind. As such, the type of moral perfectionism that is sometimes at work in Aristotelian-inspired virtue theories should be wary of too straightforward an answer on what can really be a good life for human beings in general. Accordingly, I believe that there is an irreducible dimension of plurality in the life forms that can be esteemed as good. It seems to me that the movement between the ideal of good life and its concrete instantiation can admit several possibilities in terms of its substantive content. This is not to say that every life form can count as a good life form, or that we cannot criticize life forms. As Rahel Jaeggi³¹ contends, we can indeed exert such a

²⁹ Rawls 1999.

³⁰ Sandel 1982.

³¹ Jaeggi 2018.

critique, and we actually need to. But this is far from saying that only one specific life form should count as a good, accomplished life.

At the start of this paper I also highlighted the way in which *phronesis* is simultaneously a form of practical wisdom and practical reasoning, and I hinted at the way in which we should discern several types of reasoning and not expect their results or processes to have the same epistemic status. This is, in my view, mainly useful to counter what can sometimes be mainstream, one-sided, even reductionist accounts of reason that might tend to consider that only certain specific disciplines or processes (e.g. those stemming from the so-called ‘hard’, exact sciences) can count as being ‘rational’. And in this – or in what I have called elsewhere a *critique of miserable reason* – the Aristotelian standpoint can be very useful, for it emphasizes alternative forms of rationality that are more at work in the Humanities and in a practical philosophy more sensible than the ones inspired by Modern philosophy. Be that as it may, *phronesis* and the deliberative choice that serves as its mean need also to be confronted with what with we today know on the limits of rationality.

Let there be no mistake: Aristotle was a profound inquirer of the human psyche and by no means should he be considered a ‘rationalist’. Within Aristotle’s practical philosophy, we are far away from the standpoint of Modern science and philosophy, with its neat separation of reason, emotions and feelings. However, deliberate choice still entails a process of consideration of different possibilities that seems to take place in some sort of sequence. This is not to ignore that the process is exploratory and might involve some sort of ‘tact’ or ‘intuition’ as we hinted at above. But if we look at the way in which this process seems to unfold, it would seem that the phronetic model suggests that in the dialectical movement between the ideal of the accomplished life and the concrete options at hand, a process of weighing the ‘pros and cons’ would take place, and that this process itself would be rational.

However, what we today know about the way the human mind works in the decision-making process leading to action seems to suggest that this process is less straightforward. Indeed, some works in the fields of behavioral economics or cognitive psychology seem to indicate that our decision-making processes are, more often than not, more ‘automatic’ than what would seem at first hand. Daniel Kahneman³², for instance, has put forward his theory of the two systems guiding our mental processes: system 1 being more or

³² Kahneman 2011.

less automatic and instinctive (fast), while system 2 demands our specific attention in the deliberation process (slow). Clearly, *phronesis* would be a process pertaining to system 2. What Kahneman suggests though is that most of the time system 1 is in charge, and not only that it functions on the basis of instincts and affects, but also that it can be misguided in its judgments by certain heuristics.

Now, these hints coming from contemporary cognitive sciences are obviously not an absolute novelty in intellectual history. Indeed, they are reminiscent, for instance, of Pascal, system 1 closely resembling the intuitions and the ‘automatic’ mode of living of that which Pascal called ‘the heart’ (and the parallel could also be extended to include a relation with Platonic *doxa*), while system 2 would be what Pascal called ‘reason’. And Ricœur himself developed, in his early works, investigations of the specific relation between the voluntary in the involuntary, both in his phenomenological works³³ and in his initial sketch of a philosophical anthropology in *Fallible Man*³⁴. However, if these findings from cognitive science are correct, the novelty is perhaps not only the very close intertwinement between system 1 and 2, but also the fact that the predominance of system 1 is even greater than what we had anticipate before. And this of course marks the limits of a phronetic model, because we sometimes tend to choose much more rapidly and instinctively. Accordingly, even what we intend by *phronesis* perhaps needs some fine-tuning in order to accommodate these findings. But this is of course not a task for this short paper, only for future investigation to develop.

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³³ Ricœur 2007.

³⁴ Ricœur 1986.

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