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Wising Up: on the possibility and shape of an Aristotelian theory of moral stage development for practical intelligence

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Introduction

In Aristotelian virtue theories, practical intelligence is foundational to being good. But to date accounts of how this particularly important virtue can emerge are sketchy. This paper explores how far the emergence of practical intelligence can be understood as akin to cognitive moral stage development, emerging progressively through typical stages.

Recently a few scholars have elaborated an approach broadly of this sort, one we might call *the desire alignment theory* (Kristjánsson, 2007; Sanderse, 2015). According to it, practical intelligence emerges in the form of full virtue—or full alignment of the agent’s desires with the demands of virtue—after passing through phases of moral indifference or confusion, incontinence, and continence. Insofar as practical intelligence is equivalent to full virtue, however, it looks like a poor candidate for stage developmental theorizing. Full virtue is many, many things and even advocates of this approach agree that there is little reason to expect that it will develop in a tidy, linear sequence of stages.

Practical intelligence does however involve certain capacities for reasoning and feeling which grow along known developmental pathways. It also involves skillful deployment of deep knowledge of human flourishing, of its constituent features, of common obstacles to it, and of the ways in which it can and cannot be achieved. To that extent it can be understood as an expertise, which, as Aristotle suggested, we can expect to acquire only by a certain stage in life, and only after passing through novice, advanced beginner, and expert stages. Progress through some of these stages would depend partly on the normal development of common human affective, cognitive, and conative capacities. But it would also depend on the average timescales on which people can be expected to be capable of skillfully deploying practical knowledge. If so, the developmental trajectory of practical intelligence would be a composite of the normal development of cognitive, conative and affective capacities, and of the ordinary timescales on which individuals pass through beginner, intermediate and expert stages of practical thinking.

My discussion will proceed as follows. First I review some recent Aristotelian thinking about the development of practical intelligence. I argue that this thinking is not plausible because it follows Aristotle in equating practical intelligence and full virtue. I then elaborate a different account in which practical intelligence is necessary but not sufficient for full virtue, but in which it unites the virtues a person actually possesses by integrating them in her psyche. This account suggests a genuinely developmental theory involving the development of a range of capacities or states, including those for reasoned reflection and reasoning from principles, empathy and perspective taking, a sharp memory for principles and past lessons learned, and for loving virtue. I hypothesize that stage development of practical intelligence is a composite of the stage development of these components, so that we can expect people who are more developed along these dimensions to be more practically intelligent. This hypothesis should be susceptible to empirical investigation and this is a further advantage of this approach over the currently popular one.

Current theorizing

Before elaborating my view it is necessary to make some preliminary clarifications, some about the nature of stage development theories, others about practical intelligence and the unity of the virtues. On a certain conception of each, a stage developmental theory of practical intelligence is, I think, a complete nonstarter. Let me explain by beginning with stage developmental theory.

Stage development theories purport to indicate the knowledge or capabilities a person should and should not, given an appropriately supportive learning environment, ordinarily possess in virtue of

their stage of development as a growing human being. In some moral stage development theories, like Lawrence Kohlberg's, progress through the stages is never regressive--once you move up, you never move back--while in others progress can be halting and people can move between adjacent higher and lower stages while developing. However stage development involves growing in ways that build on, rather than displace, capacities in earlier stages and progress is normally linear so that people do not generally leapfrog stages as they age.

This is not to say that there cannot be exceptional individuals, prodigies, who perhaps seem to begin on a higher plane than the rest of us, or who progress at much earlier stages in the lifespan through the stages. Developmental stage theories are intended to capture broadly statistical, not ideal norms, because the stages are intended to correlate with age groupings that enable us to make generally reliable predictions about people.

These aspects of stage development theory are crucial anyway to the appeal of these sorts of theories for educators. It is not that stage development theories indicate the points at which educators can expect to see their students progress to new levels of achievement without their having to teach them anything. Rather when the development of, say, rational thinking, can be seen as emerging through stages of generally increasing capacity for handling abstract ideas, teachers can anticipate the age groupings at which students are and are not ready to benefit from teaching methods involving abstract ideas, and thus teach effectively across the age spectrum.

Now according to Aristotle, practical intelligence unifies the virtues in that it is impossible to have it without having all of the character virtues and vice versa (Aristotle, 1985, sec. 1145a). Practical intelligence is thus necessary and sufficient for full virtue. Furthermore, in Aristotle's view, the fully virtuous person is distinguished from the continent and incontinent persons by the alignment of her desires with her correct judgments about what she ought to do, and by the delight she takes in being a virtuous person. The desires of the fully virtuous person, and hence of the practically wise one, align with what she rightly believes it is virtuous to do, and to that extent takes pleasure in doing it, or at least does not suffer from having to do it.

A stage development theory, so understood, does not seem to be possible for practical intelligence so understood. If it were possible, we should be able to define distinct progressive stages, correlating with age groupings, that a fully virtuous person *must* pass through—even if haltingly, still, no starting at a higher stage or skipping stages—in order to become fully virtuous. As others have observed, this does not seem to be how progress toward full virtue works.

Following Aristotle's lead and recent work by Kristján Kristjánsson (2007), Howard Curzer (2002), and others, Wouter Sanderse outlines four putatively developmental stages for full virtue which include, in order from lowest to highest, moral indifference, un-self-control, self-control, and full virtue (2015). These roughly correspond to Aristotle's states common to "the many," incontinence, continence, and *phronesis*. These are distinct in that the morally indifferent do not understand the place of virtue in the good life, confusing it for the life of pleasure or wealth or honor. Thus they cannot, nor do they care to, distinguish virtuous from vicious acts. The un-self-controlled, by contrast see the role of virtue in their good and desire to be virtuous. They can also "discriminate between virtuous and vicious acts" and are "practically wiser" in that they are capable of "discerning the particulars of the situation, reading a situation in its morally salient aspects, and hitting the mean in [their] emotional responses" (Sanderse, 2015, p. 390). Alas they "are easily overcome by desires that point in other directions" and so cannot be counted on to act virtuously.

The self-controlled by contrast are still susceptible to desires contrary to the demands of virtue, and as a consequence, being virtuous is sometimes a bother to them. But, as the name of this state suggests, they generally have the self-control to do the right thing nevertheless. Finally, the fully

virtuous person's desires come completely into alignment with her knowledge of what virtue requires, and her exercise of virtue is mediated by the possession of practical wisdom. As a consequence the virtues are integrated in the fully virtuous person's psyche—they genuinely express her agency and not simply the moral disposition nature bestowed upon her—and she generally takes satisfaction in doing the right thing and delights in living a virtuous life (even though some of the things she realizes she must do are difficult or otherwise unpleasant).

This set of states other things equal marks out an attractive and normative ideal of full virtue and of important ways we can fall short of that ideal. It does not, however, constitute a plausible developmental story in the sense intended here. Indeed Sanderse, citing insights from Kristjansson (2007) and Curzer (1998), points out that,

From an Aristotelian perspective, there are no reasons why some people might not start out at the second level (e.g. because of the natural virtue they are endowed with from birth) or conquer their lack of self-control in such a way that they become virtuous at once, skipping the self-controlled stage. In addition, people seem to be able to exemplify combinations of self-control and lack of self-control. (Sanderse, 2015, p. 386)

If this is so, these states do not constitute developmental stages. Each state does indeed mark "a level of alignment between reason, desire, and action and the sort of pleasure that accompanies it" which "changes as a person reaches a new [level]" (p. 387). But if change can occur willy-nilly in persons from one state to the other so that we cannot predict what state a person is in by knowledge of either her current state or her developmental age group, these states are not developmental stages in the sense of interest. Consequently what Sanderse and others have elaborated is not really a developmental theory, but a normative ideal of full virtue, one setting out the criteria by which we should judge a person's character with respect to virtue. This is quite different from a story that explains how non-virtuous people ordinarily transform into virtuous ones.

Apart from this more formal problem, this *desire alignment theory* suffers some substantive implausibility, some of which Sanderse discusses. According to the desire alignment theory, progress toward practical wisdom proceeds really in two steps, a knowledge step and a motivation step. First, the would-be *phronemos* has to know the difference between virtuous and vicious actions. Second, she has to bring her desires into alignment with what she knows to be virtuous. In the desire alignment theory, the first step seems to be a baby step achieved merely by moving from moral indifference to lack of self-control, the bulk of progress toward virtue apparently requiring a Titanic struggle against the self that takes two further steps.

This is not plausible for two reasons. First, it is incredible that a person could move from being morally indifferent to having the sort of practical knowledge that Sanderse ascribes to the un-self-controlled. These include the comprehension and understanding needed to detect morally salient features of one's situation (e.g. whether of having been betrayed or justly made to wait one's turn) and hit the mean in one's emotional reactions to it. These capacities are probably some of the most difficult, high-level abilities of practical intelligence. Second, it also seems rather incredible that someone could have the knowledge of the un-self-controlled person yet be the sort of person who cannot be counted on to act virtuously. Perhaps this is a problem for young children or teenagers, and certainly people are susceptible to weakness of will. But in a normal adult person occasional weakness of will would seem to be an inescapable condition, not a phase any person having comprehension, understanding, and so on could get stuck in. Indeed perhaps this intuition underlies the claim that progress toward full virtue can involve skipping steps like this one. But if so, this is not really a stage in progress toward virtue but an aberration in that progress as explained by a theory having different stages.

A further problem, one Sanderson discusses at some length, concerns the plausibility of the distinction between full virtue and continence. As others have observed (Curzer, 2002), full virtue seems to be rather more unpleasant than Aristotle seems to suggest (or if the problem is not what Aristotle actually said, what a naïve reading of Aristotle would suggest). If so, the cut between full virtue and self-control is not clearly marked by the greater pleasure the virtuous person takes in being virtuous.

This last issue would be a distraction from the present topic—an internal problem for advocates of the desire alignment approach to work out amongst themselves—were it not for the fact that one solution to it suggests a possible direction that might lead to a way out of this maze. The distinction here might be made out by, on the one hand, laying the category of continence/self-control to rest, and attending on the other more to Aristotle's ideas that practical wisdom is a particularly deep sort of knowledge of particulars, a knowledge that nowadays is sometimes described more as understanding or appreciation. This is what the incontinent/un-self-controlled lack. The fully virtuous person possesses practical knowledge at the highest level (perhaps alongside other things), and progress toward practical intelligence is largely an epistemic enterprise. This should not be surprising since practical intelligence is, after all, a virtue of thought. If that is so, the fully virtuous person and persons of lesser virtue alike *may* struggle with their desires just as little or as much as good people can. But the virtuous person can get started on it sooner and will ordinarily have less trouble with it because her capacity to comprehend her moral situation and to appreciate what virtue demands of her is far clearer to her.

But in order to make a case for this view, some further clarifications are needed. The sense in which practical intelligence is a component of full virtue by way of uniting them must be reformulated, for part of the problem for the desire alignment theory is that it is a theory of full virtue, which is many, many things, not one discrete trait, practical intelligence. Perhaps this explains why as well, surprisingly, the desire alignment theory actually says little about the components forming the psychological bases of the things practically intelligent people do so well, namely (to paraphrase Aristotle now) "grasp truth in action through reason about human goods" (see NE, 1140b5 for Aristotle's definition). It also tells us little to nothing about what changes mark improvement of these components. On the contrary, it tells us which configurations of the components (desire, emotion, action and pleasure) with respect to one another conform to full virtue and which do not; it does not tell us what role these play in our ability to discern the truth about what we ought to do in order flourish, nor how they change in ways that mark improvements with respect to that ability. I turn then in the next section to articulating a different, although still Aristotelian account of practical intelligence, its psychological components, and the sense in which practical intelligence unites the virtues.

Practical intelligence

A crucial reason why the desire alignment theory is not plausibly a developmental stage theory is that progress toward full virtue does not proceed in a linear fashion through stages of moral indifference, incontinence, and the rest. Thus if a developmental stage theory of practical intelligence is possible, it must be possible to distinguish practical intelligence as one virtue among others—albeit a very, very important one—that is necessary but not singly sufficient for full virtue. We must also then be able to specify a sense in which practical intelligence unites the virtues that does not commit us to the independently absurd idea that having practical intelligence is sufficient for having every virtue. In doing this, we should then have to—and hopefully be able to—isolate the capacities forming the psychological bases of practical intelligence *per se* and then look to what we know about how these bases normally develop in growing human beings.

I believe an account of this sort that is both still Aristotelian and broadly plausible can be constructed. As Aristotle defines it, practical intelligence is "a state grasping truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being" (1140b5). This is perhaps a clunky way of saying that practical intelligence is a reasoned ability to ascertain truths about what we ought to do (or must do, or what it is right to do) in particular circumstances that is grounded in and expresses a correct understanding of human good, of what is good or bad for us. That is a fancy scholar's way of saying that practically wise people know what's good for us and are consequently very good at determining what we ought to do when trouble looms.

We flagged earlier some of the components of this virtue, including comprehension, or the ability to read the morally salient features of one's situation correctly, and understanding, or the ability to grasp which particular actions are required to achieve general ends (for example, justice or generosity) in particular circumstances. But others Aristotle discusses include "sense" in assessing what it would be reasonable or unreasonable to ask of oneself or others, and the cleverness needed to identify efficient means to one's ends.

Understood this way practical intelligence is primarily a cognitive and affective/perceptual virtue, the one belonging to people who are particularly good at detecting when trouble looms, defining precisely what the trouble is, and determining what virtue requires that they (or we) do about it. It is also a distinct virtue that, while requiring the possession of a suite of basic intellectual and character virtues, is not obviously dependent upon having all of them nor sufficient for having all. In fact strength in certain character virtues may be a disadvantage relative to practical intelligence. Honest or sincere people for instance can be very naïve about the intentions of others and thus be susceptible to major errors of comprehension. On the other hand, a person who is not particularly generous may have more trouble seeing when breakdowns in trust are coming his way than one who is more generous. But if he is a friendly enough sort, he could be expected to see them soon enough and find his way to the right thing to do in response. A decently well-developed practical intelligence can survive the absence of some of the character virtues because some can be a liability when it comes to wising up and most less-than-fully virtuous persons are completely vicious anyway.

This ideal also involves a plausible unity of the virtues thesis. Insofar as all true character virtues—"true" in being opposed to natural virtue—are filtered through deliberation, practical intelligence is a necessary component of all of the character virtues. However because part of its function is to specify the ends we ought pursue in action, including e.g. what particular courses of action in our particular situation would constitute being courageous, practical intelligence unites the virtues that we possess by integrating the demands they make on us in our thought. Practically intelligent people may not have all of the virtues, but the ones they do have will tend to harmonize.

Practical intelligence understood this way might help resolve the motivational issues that plague the desire alignment theory. It is essentially a virtue of thought and does not entail having all of the character virtues. People who are practically intelligent can be expected to want what they know virtue to demand, and to want it all the more as their practical knowledge deepens and grows into what might better be called an appreciation of virtue, of its demands and its rewards. It would be odd to think of a person as even having practical intelligence at all if their wills were not at all oriented toward virtue in this way.

What this story does not assume however is that practically intelligent people never desire to act contrary to virtue to some extent. Because practical intelligence only weakly unites the virtues and does not guarantee having every character virtue, some quite wise people can find themselves wanting too much pleasure, too little pain, etc. No matter. If they are wise, they will know this and know what they ought to do about it. What the story does assume then is that practical intelligence

is essentially a form of deep knowledge and understanding and that wising up is a process of learning to skillfully deploy that knowledge/understanding in practical life.

An epistemological theory

If practical intelligence is skillful deployment of practical knowledge, its development will be a function of the acquisition of practical knowledge and increasing refinement of the states or capacities that enable skillful deployment of that knowledge. Practical intelligence will then grow through successive beginner, intermediate, and expert stages, though these terms may be just placeholders for illuminating descriptors yet to be discovered. What are the relevant states or capacities?

For Aristotelians, skillful deployment of practical knowledge occurs through the exercise of comprehension, understanding, sense, and cleverness. Thus one way to understand the process of wising up is partly through development and refinement of these virtues. Aristotle's discussion of these virtues is often sketchy and devoted to definitional matters, however. Rather than attempt to extract a more detailed understanding of their underlying psychology from a difficult text, I enter some speculative but (hopefully) plausible suggestions using the Aristotelian framework. I hypothesize that practical intelligence develops partly as a composite of their development, or as the curve that fits the developmental curve of these. Theoretically this hypothesis should be testable so that acceptance or rejection of this whole theory should ultimately turn on results from empirical investigation.

First, as practically intelligent people presumably do actually engage in *intelligent* practical deliberation, not unintelligent deliberation, the practically intelligent person must have a basically positive orientation toward virtue. She must care enough about virtue to think intelligently and in ways reflecting virtue rather than unintelligently reflecting vice.

Second, because understanding and cleverness involve reasoning (about what ends would constitute virtue in a particular situation and about efficient means to that end), fully developed practical thinkers need developed capacities for reasoned reflection and for reasoning from principles. This reasoning may be more or less explicit (Russell, 2009), and if practical intelligence is a skill, it presumably becomes more implicit and intuitive with increasing expertise (similarly to expertise in other skills). Still, practical intelligence is activated in response to practical dilemmas and there is reason to think that even expert practical thinkers will frequently reason about them overtly. The most complex require careful balancing of competing considerations or interests, for example, or involve other people and should be worked out with them.

Third, since comprehension is a crucial component of the practical reasoner's ability to do this in particular situations, various forms of perspective-taking, or cognitively rich empathy, and moral imagination, are crucial to practical intelligence. Being able to comprehend our situation aright probably includes the (cognitive) ability to calculate the consequences of alternative courses of action. But some, perhaps most, of this will concern comprehending the states and intentions of others (e.g. by not returning my calls is Jones ignoring me or did the death of her mother lead her to withdraw socially?) and imagining how our own behaviour might affect them and shape their intentions.

Finally, since determining what virtue requires of us in particular situations involves sense and understanding the goods of virtue (i.e. involves understanding the ends that the various virtues typically serve), as well as knowledge of (Aristotelian) "particulars" (e.g. what sorts of actions are regarded as expressing loyalty in your culture), practical intelligence involves a sharp memory for principles, including proverbs, and for past lessons learned. Arguably it is by way of inductive

inference from past experience or observation, together with knowledge of the particulars, that wise people know what, e.g. being honest requires in *this* situation. Giving advice to someone, for example, she might say, “No, you don’t need to tell anyone about X to this group; these are all people who have been through the same thing, and they don’t care if you have X-ed.”

Altogether then, we have that the fundamental psychological components of fully developed practical wisdom include:

1. A strong desire to be virtuous.
2. Refined cognitive capacities for reasoned reflection, reasoning from principles, and anticipating and calculating consequences of actions.
3. A developed capacity to empathize with and take the perspective of others.
4. A sharp memory for principles, proverbs, and past lessons learned in their application.

This theory should be empirically testable. Much work would have to be done to actually study it. But the hypothesis is that the higher individuals test on these four variables, the higher they should test on independent measures of practical intelligence. If this is correct, we could begin to construct a framework for empirical investigation into the development of practical intelligence. Work from developmental fields can be used to begin the process of identifying stages of development for these components and correlating them to age groupings. These could then be collected together to give us a composite picture of the development of the defining virtue of practically intelligent people. Insofar as this practical intelligence is a virtue that is highly akin to a skill, the stages of the composite model would indicate increased level of skill in practical deliberation. If increasing expertise in this skill is akin to increasing expertise of other skills, increasing expertise in practical deliberation is generally a process of moving from very explicit, deliberate and laboured thinking to faster, more intuitive thinking, although it is understood that the most complicated practical dilemmas will typically require even expert practical thinkers to engage in overt reasoning.

Conclusion

I have argued that the currently popular desire alignment theory is not a properly developmental theory. Insofar as practical intelligence is identical to full virtue, progress toward it can be halting or non-linear, so that moral indifference, incontinence, and continence are less the stages through which a would-be *phronemos* must pass as simply various ways of falling short of moral perfection. In place of this approach I have proposed disentangling practical intelligence and full virtue, so that a developmental story can be built through attention to the psychological components of a relatively unitary trait, practical intelligence. Identifying this with the skillful deployment of practical knowledge, I have suggested that practically intelligent persons pass through beginner, intermediate and expert stages of Aristotelian comprehension, understanding, sense, and cleverness, and I have suggested some natural ways of understanding the psychology of these capacities. This approach is Aristotelian in building on some common Aristotelian ideas about the function and components of practical intelligence, and also in assuming that the highest stage of practical intelligence will not ordinarily be achieved until later in life, when individuals have compiled a large stock of practical experience knowledge. However it also has the added Aristotelian feature that its correctness should ultimately turn on evidence from empirical research.

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