

An eye on particulars with the end in sight. An account of Aristotelian phronesis

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(EARLY DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE WITHOUT PERMISSION)

This paper focuses on Aristotelian phronesis and aims at highlighting its nature of an “eye” on particulars, with general ends in sight. More specifically, I will challenge the particularistic interpretation of phronesis and Aristotelian ethics, in order to argue for a “qualified generalism”. First, I will move from an interpretation that I call the *Priority of Particular Reading* (PPR), and which I envisage mainly in the work of Nancy Sherman (1989), Martha Nussbaum (1990) and Sarah Broadie (1991). I will try to explain why such influential interpreters have proposed this reading of Aristotle’s phronesis and virtues, outlining their main arguments. Secondly, I will discuss the transition from PPR to a further step, namely that of a proper *Particularistic Reading* (PR), which, according to a major proponent like John McDowell (1998), consists in interpreting phronesis and the other virtues merely as forms of practical perception. Then, I will discuss some strategies to weaken PR that I claim to be intrinsic to PPR, such as claiming Aristotle to be a “qualified particularist” (Sherman 1997) and appealing to the role of ethical theory to counteract the primacy of practical perception (Nussbaum 2000). Finally, I will challenge PR directly, by appealing to my own reading of Aristotle’s phronesis, conceived as a virtue capable of grasping particulars while having general ends in sight, thanks to its several sub-excellences – that compose a varied picture of sub-abilities to interpret and read the particular situation – and to its relation with the virtues and with other forms of ethical knowledge. I will show that it is possible to defend a legitimate form of PPR without ending in holding PR, and that Aristotle’s own theory and work offer plenty of insights to ground a “moderate” reading like mine.

1. The *Priority of Particular Reading*

Several Neo-Aristotelian thinkers are committed to a reading of Aristotle's ethics that I've labelled *Priority of Particular Reading* (PPR), which is clearly related to some of Moral Particularism's key assumptions. From an historical point of view, I think we can even claim that:

- ✓ The contemporary recovery of Aristotle has often taken the form of PPR;
- ✓ Such recovery, in turn, has been among the main causes of an emphasis on the importance of particulars in ethics, as opposed to a relevance assigned to rules and general principles;
- ✓ Thus, indirectly, such PPR may even be listed as one of the main sources of MP. No wonder, then, if many particularistic thinkers, such as Lawrence Blum, John McDowell, Jonathan Dancy, Margaret Little, can all be defined as Aristotelian particularists, at least *lato sensu*.

To my knowledge, three influential and well-known works, published around the same few years, have been among the main responsible for such a reading: Nancy Sherman's *The Fabric of Character* (1989), *The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality* by Martha Nussbaum (1990) and *Ethics with Aristotle*, by Sarah Broadie (1991). Despite dealing with different topics, these three essays, share a key idea: namely, that of restoring phronesis as a form of knowledge of particulars, and, on the other hand, underestimating the role of general knowledge and principles in ethics. Broadie, for instance, claims that only who rules the polis needs a general knowledge of the good (or, in Broadie's words, of the "grand end"), whereas virtuous citizens simply need habituation and a good moral character. Nussbaum, in the mentioned essay, refers to the «priority of the particular» (Nussbaum 1990, 66), aiming therefore at stressing the chronological and normative priority of practical perception over general principles, whose role is only that of summarizing wise choices and decisions, and which might even be harmful if they came from above, representing, as it were, a failure of practical reason.

In order to oppose deontology and consequentialism, PPR proposers emphasize two Aristotelian theses (and to minimize others):

- i. The *uncodifiability thesis*;
- ii. The *priority of practical perception thesis*.

As for (i), it arises out of several methodological remarks Aristotle makes throughout *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially Book I, where he explicitly states that the ethical field is, by its very nature, an imprecise one:

«But our account would be adequate, if we achieved a degree of precision appropriate to the underlying material; for precision must not be sought to the same degree in all

accounts of things, any more than it is by craftsmen in the things they are producing. Fine things and just things, which are what political expertise inquires about, involve great variation and irregularity, so that they come to seem fine and just by convention alone, and not by nature. Something like this lack of regularity is found also in good things, because of the fact that they turn out to be a source of damage to many people: some in fact have perished because of wealth, others because of courage. We must be content, then, when talking about things of this sort and starting from them, to show what is true about them roughly and in outline, and when talking about things that are for the most part, and starting from these, to reach conclusions too of the same sort. It is in this same way, then, that one must also receive each sort of account; for it is a mark of an educated person to look for precision in each kind of inquiry just to the extent that the nature of the subject allows it» (NE I, 1094b 11-25).

Such remarks have been read by PPR proposers as a powerful weapon against theories built upon rules and principles, supposedly applicable in each and every situation. Similar theories appear incapable of making sense of the evidence that every moral situation is irreducibly complex, impossible to simplify without losing precision, detail, and an accurate grasp of the situation itself. Ethics deals with contingency, with what admits of variation, which cannot be fully captured by a general rule. Thus, ethics cannot be fully codified in advance; it does not need general norms, but a flexible method, capable of approaching each situation with moral sensitivity. Every case is unique; thus, virtue consists in finding the right mean, by making use of the “Lesbian rule” (NE V, 1137 b30-32): «For the rule of what is indefinite is itself indefinite, like the leaden rule used in building Lesbian-style: the rule adapts itself to the configuration of the stone, instead of staying the same shape, and the decree adapts itself to actual events».

Enough on the uncodifiability thesis; as for (ii), let us deepen what it means to appeal to Aristotelian moral perception, which is the second key to understand Aristotle’s contribution to the particularistic theses, as well as his relevance for contemporary moral theory. Aristotle, as it is well known, holds we are accountable for how we perceive reality, since:

- ✓ Having a certain (virtuous or vicious) character is a matter of upbringing, but also of voluntary choice;
- ✓ Character alters and conditions the quality of our moral perceptions.

As he claims in NE, Book III,

«Suppose someone said that while every one of us aims at what appears to us good, we are not in control of the appearance, but rather the sort of person each of us is, whatever that may be, determines how the end, too, appears to him. Well, if each of us is himself somehow responsible for causing his disposition in himself, he will also be somehow responsible for the appearance in question» (NE III, 1114a 30-1114b 1).

It is typical of ethical virtue, as Aristotle conceives it, to allow the agent to see certain goods instead of others, to be sensitive to certain reasons, to grasp reality in its particular and contingent features with a certain moral outlook. The perfection of virtue, therefore, consists in a right perception of particulars, a quasi-visual capacity of concrete moral understanding (NE III, 1114b 6). This capacity depends on the intellectual virtue of phronesis (which I will discuss at more length near the conclusion of my paper) and, secondly, on the possession of properly ordered emotions, that is, emotions shaped by ethical virtues, given that emotions play the key epistemic role of giving information on one's surroundings. Indeed, it is the emotive structure of one's character, shaped by the virtues, that gives one access to the goods that orient deliberation and choice; that is, to moral reasons and values.

By summing up these two elements, we can conclude, with PPR supporters, that Aristotle cannot be a generalist *stricto sensu*, in that he assigns chronological and methodological priority to the perception of particulars, and makes ethics an uncodifiable field, with no general rules available. Also, Aristotle cannot be a generalist for a further reason, highlighted by Nussbaum: according to her reading, Aristotle's view lacks a "single standard" against which one can establish a hierarchy among the various goods (Nussbaum 1992). Thus, all authentic goods, and the related virtues, represent a genuine plurality, and no rules of maximization can be introduced to reduce such plurality to unity. The refusal of adopting a single standard means, for Nussbaum's Aristotle, to reject the two Platonic principles which made Platonic ethics a science:

- ✓ *Singleness Principle*, according to which there is a single good making good all the others;
- ✓ *Metricity Principle*, which establishes an external standard against which to measure the various good.

Thus, a good life is one which encompasses the various, distinct activities that correspond to the virtues, and all the different goods are equally genuinely such, and therefore immeasurable.

2. From PPR to PR: a particularistic reading of Aristotle's ethics

It's not difficult to see how, from a reading assigning such a strong priority to the perception of particulars, one can move to a more radical view, which equates the possession of virtue with perception and rules out any role of general knowledge and principles in ethics. This is the consequence drawn by some of PPR exponents, such as, notably, McDowell (1998), who is perhaps one of the most "extreme" of Aristotle's readers. In his notorious essay *Virtue and Reason*, McDowell identifies practical knowledge with a "reliable sensitivity", which in turn is "a sort of perceptual capacity" (McDowell 1998, 51). He proposes a particularistic reading of Aristotle, claiming that such perceptual capacity:

- a. Is the only form of knowledge which is needed to possess virtue;
- b. Consists in seeing an aspect of the situation "as a reason for acting in some way". This reason, in turn, "is apprehended not as outweighing or overriding any reasons for acting in other ways, [...] but as silencing them" (McDowell 1998, 56).
- c. Issues judgements which are uncodifiable into general rules of conduct;
- d. Is the complete explanation of the actions that manifest the virtue (see McDowell 1998, 52) and, thus,
- e. "Turns out to be what the virtue is" (*Ibid.*)

Being virtuous, in this perspective, turns out to be nothing else than having a perceptual moral knowledge which consists in a reliable sensitivity to the requirements imposed by each situation. Being faithful to Aristotle means therefore for McDowell dismissing the deeply-rooted prejudice according to which virtue requires a set of rules, and "formulable universal principles" (58). Such prejudice has to be removed not only as an homage to Aristotle, but also in light of Wittgenstein's attack, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, of the idea of following a rule. This, McDowell argues, is perfectly expressed by Cavell, when he invites us to accept the "terrifying vision", "the vertigo, induced by the thought that there is nothing but shared forms of life to keep us, as it were, on the rails" (61). We should respect, McDowell says, Aristotle's belief that "a view of how one should live is not codifiable", and that "the envisaged major premise, in a virtue syllogism, cannot be definitely written down" (67).

3. PPR-based strategies to weaken PR

Now that I've exposed the main traits of two (increasingly) particularistic readings of Aristotle, let's see how this portrait can be weakened. The first set of strategies is a PPR based one, in that it is put forward by the very proponents of a PPR, Sherman and Nussbaum.

Aristotle as a qualified particularist

The first strategy amounts to reading Aristotle as a *qualified particularist*, and is proposed by Sherman in a chapter on Aristotelian particularism of her 1997 work. Despite the priority of particular thesis, Sherman maintains that Aristotle offers a qualified particularism, where general, yet non-universal – rules play a significant role. Such general rules, which summarize particular cases, can prove essential to deal with new cases, and they rule out the possibility of reading Aristotle as a particularist intuitionist, who would portray moral judgement as an intuition issued by a mysterious perceptive faculty which simply happens to “cottoning on” (Sherman 1997, 254). As she puts it, “if we understand intuitionism as implying a grasp of moral judgments that precludes more ordinary and reiterative processes of description, explanation, justification, or revision, then Aristotle is no intuitionist” (*ibid.*). Even if Aristotelian moral judgement has much more to do with perception than other kinds of judgements, it implies also the capacity of seeing particulars “under a description”, and therefore involves a number of cognitive capacities, labelled as “parts” of phronesis, as we will see later on. Thus, practical wisdom comprises, so to speak, a perceptive side, and a cognitive one, which cannot be separated: there is no immediacy in approaching particulars, they can be reached only after a description and redescription, which allows a recognition of the case at hand in light of a certain interpretation. Practical perception is a case of recognition made possible by the possession of adequate concepts, just like what happens in geometry, where one comes to recognize a triangle (NE 1142 a14-15) by recognizing that “this is a that” (*Poet.*, 1148 b15). Descriptions, thus, play a key role. What about rules and principles? In Sherman's view, there are no universal judgements to be taken as major premises of a practical syllogism. “Universal” is simply the name of what the moral expert is endowed with, i.e. the competence enabling her to recognize particulars without cottoning on. On the one hand, therefore, one cannot entirely codify experience, and no exhaustive and comprehensive role can comprise it. On the other, Aristotle does not dispose entirely of rules, in that ethical competence involves some general principles which hold “for the most part” (*hos epi to polu*, NE 1094 b13-22). This means, for instance, that even if there is no fixed hierarchy among virtues, a certain order holds for the most part, and, generally speaking, contemplative life is superior to the active one.

The role of ethical theory

In at least two different papers, Nussbaum herself, despite being among the main proposers of a PPR, suggests a strategy to prevent it from becoming a proper PR. In her 1999 article “Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?”, she offers a first sketch of how to account for the role of ethical theory as a counterbalance to particularism. There she claims that most ancient philosophers were strong universalists, in that they believed in the existence of a very general concept of human flourishing, valid for all humans. What they proposed, therefore, was a theory-universalism, rather than a rule-universalism; i.e., an “alliance between theory and a fine-tuned judgment of the particular circumstances of life”, whereas “rules, standing in the middle, deliver neither the overall understanding nor the fine-tuned judgment” (Nussbaum 1999, 178). Generally valid rules, however, are “frequently valuable in the agent’s deliberations. For often agents cannot assess the particular circumstances well enough, whether on account of time, or deficient information, or incomplete moral development, or special bias” (*ibid.*).

Similar statements are made by Nussbaum in her 2000 essay, “Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle and Bad Behavior”, where she develops the same argument further. While authors like Baier, Williams and Diamond reject the importance of theory in ethics, grounding on the idea that modern moral theories are too detached from the concreteness of real ethical life, Nussbaum restates the need for a retrieval of the (originally Stoic) distinction between theories, rules and particular judgements. Such distinction, according to Nussbaum, helps understanding a natural alliance between theory and judgements, in that it is precisely an ethical theory what allows to see the limits of rules and to correct them. Criticizing systems of rules, therefore, does not imply *ipso facto* criticizing theories, unless the latter entirely correspond to the former.

A theory is, for Nussbaum, “a set of reasons and interconnected arguments, explicitly and systematically articulated, with some degree of abstractness and generality, which gives directions for ethical practice” (Nussbaum 2000, 233). Thus, it does not coincide with a system or a list of rules (such as “don’t kill”, “don’t steal”, etc.); rather, it often “displaces” systems of rules typical of religion and custom, by “giving *reasons for* the value of the rule in question” (Nussbaum 2000, 237) in terms of a single end or of a plurality of ends. Thus, it corrects the obtuseness of a system of rules, and it provides the agent with reasons and motives to follow them, or to make exceptions.

4. Aristotle as a “qualified generalist”: intrinsically Aristotelian reasons

The two PPR strategies outlined so far have already offered useful insights, and shown that holding PPR does not amount to supporting *ipso facto* PR. What I want to propose now, is an intrinsically

Aristotelian strategy to weaken PR, so to show that Aristotelian ethics has a two-way movement, from particularity to general ends, and vice versa. Paraphrasing Sherman, I'd define Aristotle as a "qualified generalist", whose account of ethical virtue and phronesis equally accounts for (i) the need of saving the contingent (in line with both PPR and PR), and (ii) the orientation to general ends properly seen and desired as good. These two points represent, respectively, the minor and major premise of a practical syllogism. And, if I am right, contrary to what McDowell claims, they can both be written down.

Before arguing for both (i) and (ii), however, I'd like to spend some words in a warning against PPR, many assumptions of which I am nevertheless going to defend. Despite the undeniable importance assigned to the perceptual discernment of particulars, for which I will argue in a moment, it is useful to remind that an interpretation of Aristotelian ethics as concerned primarily with such perceptual discernment is, indeed, *an* interpretation. Historically speaking, many other readings have been put forward, moved perhaps by different concerns, and interested in finding an answer to such concerns in Aristotelian ethical thinking. Notoriously, for centuries Aristotle has been taken, without any doubt, as a generalist, a universalist, or even a deductivist, a mere forerunner of Thomas Aquinas (read himself as merely the proposer of a natural law view). What I am trying to say is that a major and rich figure like Aristotle's admits of several readings, each stressing different (real) aspects of his work, and sometimes overstating them. And each inspired by the *Zeitgeist*.

Saving the contingent: phronesis as positing the minor premise of a practical syllogism

The first aspect, concerning practical perception, and the salvation of contingent particulars, depends as noted on the possession of phronesis, which deals with a contingent matter that cannot be determined *a priori* by a scientific theory or a fixed set of universal rules to be applied. The excellence of phronesis consists in descending to the singular case, in a non-deductive way, and in identifying the particular action which embodies the end here and now, in the light of the circumstances. As Aristotle notes, the capacity of discerning and perceiving the situation in its singularity is not accidental to prudence, but rather represents its specific excellence.

But how does phronesis acquire its peculiar knowledge of the contingent, which enables it to understand and grasp the situation and the circumstances? The answer lies in the link existing in phronesis between practical reason and internal senses, a link which becomes even more visible when analyzing the habits that accompany phronesis and represent its sub-excellences, or, as

Aquinas will say a few centuries later, its “integral parts”. They represent, as far as I can see, the “eyes” of phronesis on the contingent, and its means to reach the sensible sphere.

At NE VI, 1142 a23-30, Aristotle lists several sub-excellences of phronesis, responsible for its cognitive quasi-sensible moral perception, such as *eubulia* (good deliberation), *synesis* (comprehension), *gnome* (sense) and, above all, *nous*, that is, understanding, or intelligence of particulars, i.e. an immediate and intuitive capacity of acknowledging the moral relevance of a contingent situation. Such habits, as Aristotle underlines at NE VI, 1143a 24-34, have the same aim and belong to the same people, for all these disposition concern what comes last (*ta eschata*) and particular cases (*ta kat'hekaston*). *Nous*, in particular, seems to play a key role in connecting phronesis with particulars. While this term normally indicates the faculty able to grasp by intuition the first indemonstrable principles of knowledge, here it is the name of a practical faculty concerning particular actions. When introducing *nous*, Aristotle states that it concerns what is last and contingent, which is “the starting point of that for the sake of which” (NE VI, 1143 b4), for *ek ton kath'hekasta gar to kath'olon*: “universals come from particulars” (NE VI, 1143 b5). What Aristotle is referring to in this central passage might be the process of habituation, *ethismos*, already explained at NE I, 1098b 3-4: “Of starting points, some are grasped by induction, some by perception, some by a sort of habituation”. This means that accomplishing certain kinds of actions, one gets used to a certain kind of ends. Broadie, on the contrary, translates “things that are universal consist of particulars”, meaning that perceiving the concrete action transforms a vague aiming to the end in a decision; that is, “generalities come into being only as particularized”. However it may be, Aristotle is implying here that of particular cases “one must have perception [...] and this is intelligence”. Thus, grasping particulars is a sort of intelligence, whose immediacy is comparable to that of a kind of sensation (*aesthesia*). *Nous*, therefore, is an intelligent sight, an ability to grasp particulars¹.

Therefore, *nous* provides phronesis with knowledge of singular data by means of a sensorial and intellectual intuition. It is a form of perception capable of grasping data as particular specifications of the universal end of action. As such, then, *nous* is one of the cognitive preconditions of *phronesis*, providing it with the knowledge of the singular it needs to give birth to good actions.

To sum up, establishing the second premise of a practical syllogism, i.e., the premise according to which “this is a that”, is a matter of seeing particulars in a morally correct way. This, in turn,

¹ It might be even translated as “attention” or “sensitivity”, since the peculiarity of *nous* seems to be a sort of attention, an opening to reality able to perceive its relevant aspects, similar to the attitude of those, who are called “sensitive”, who are able understand at a first glance that the person whom they are talking with is sad, or that one aspect of a situation is more relevant than others.

implies being capable of perceiving the situation, deliberating, and judging. In order to deliberate well (*eubulia*), the agent needs a good disposition of his imaginative power, enabling him easily to see different data; moreover, she needs an immediate intellectual grasp (*nous*) of experience, which is the first source from which she can obtain indications and data, and results from several empirical perceptions and memories, and can therefore convey to the agent general guidelines, enabling her to solve a practical problem without an excessive expenditure of cognitive energies. In order to judge well (*sunesis, gnome*), finally, she needs a developed common sense.

Phronesis, therefore, in order to obtain the knowledge of contingent it needs to operate well, must lean on the external and internal senses, whose excellences are represented by the sub-virtues mentioned so far, since they are the only powers which can reach the individual in its individuality.

The orientation to general ends: the first premise of a practical syllogism

The very same treatise where Aristotle outlines his account of phronesis and its role in finding the minor premise of a practical syllogism, also offers plenty of insights on the role of general ends in deliberation and choice. I will recall here some of them, in order to argue for the possibility of writing the major premise of a practical syllogism, contrary to what McDowell claims. Here is a list of 4 of them.

First of all, in NE book II, Aristotle defends the idea that some acts do not admit of intermediacy, for they are bad in themselves and cannot be performed in a virtuous way: “But not every action admits of intermediacy, nor does every affection; for in some cases they have been named in such a way that they are combined with badness from the start, as e.g. with malice, shamelessness, grudging ill will, and in the case of actions, fornication, theft, murder; for all these, and others like them, owe their names to the fact that they themselves – not excessive versions of them, or deficient ones – are bad” (NE II, 1106b 34-35). This remark might be taken as pointing in a generalist direction, in that it takes some reasons as invariant in every case, no matter the context or the particular circumstances.

Secondly, at NE VI Aristotle mentions a *skopos* or *horos* to which the virtuous agent has to aim in order to hit the right mean: “Since we have said earlier that one must choose what is intermediate, not excess, and not deficiency, and that what is intermediate is ‘as the correct prescription prescribes’, let us delimit this. For with all the dispositions we have discussed, just as with everything else, there is a target, as it were, that the person with the prescription has in view as he tenses and relaxes, and a kind of mark that determines the intermediate states” (NE VI, 1138

b15, 1138 b24). Some interpreters², who argue for a dominant view of *eudaimonia*, and identify the final end with contemplative life, take this passage as suggesting that, while choosing and determining the mean, the agent should aim at the promotion of contemplation. But even if we reject such a strong thesis, and adopt an inclusive view of the final end, it is easy to see here something quite similar to what Nussbaum would call a “single standard”: namely, a criterion against which to evaluate and establish a hierarchy.

The third and central point, concerns the way in which first practical principles enter into the practical syllogism: are they object or knowledge or desire? And, in case they are known, are they established (by means of deliberation) or known by phronesis? Quite clearly, the affective orientation to general ends is provided by moral virtues. But, how do they relate (if they do) to moral rational components in knowing and/or determining the end of action? What is at stake here is the very nature of phronesis, of the deliberation it involves, and of its relation with the ends of action. Aristotle famously claims that deliberation is concerned only with ‘particulars’, and that “we deliberate, not about ends, but about what forwards those ends” (NE III.3, 1112b11–12, 33–4; cf. EE II.10, 1226b9–12, 1227a5ff). As Russell notes, according to a ‘quasi-Humean’ reading of such passage, our grasp of ends is non-rational, and phronesis only works out “means and constituents of ends that motivate from outside the intellect” (2009, 6). On the other hand, a non-Humean view holds that, while the end is not established by deliberation, it is nonetheless grasped by phronesis. But how? Some interpreters, famously Kenny, read the above passage on *nous* as suggesting the existence of a peculiar kind of intelligence (*nous*) concerning the good and the universal practical principle³: “intelligence has as its objects what is last in both directions; for both the primary definitions and what is last in practical reasoning are to be grasped by intelligence” (NE VI, 1143 a26-37). Thus, they read the mentioned passage on *nous* as implying both an immediate grasp of particular data, and a similar (intellectual) grasp of first practical principles. There would be a link, according to this reading, between the ability to see particulars and that of knowing first practical principles, making each other possible, since “things that are universal consist of particulars” (NE VI, 1143 b5), either by intuition or, as others claim, by induction. Natali, for instance, as already stated, reads the same passage as referring to *ethismos*, a kind of induction which derives general ends and rules of conduct from a summary of particular cases. In any case, *nous*, even when implying a perception of particulars, would be related to the possibility of summarizing particulars

² Among others, we may recall Kenny 1992 and Kraut 1989.

³ Among the many voices of this huge debate, we may recall here at least Irwin 1978; Kraut 1993, pp. 361-374; Tuozzo, 1991, 193-212; Reeve, 1992.

into general ends. Thus, no matter how we read this passage, therefore, the non-Humean view seems the more appropriate to account for the genuine Aristotelian picture of how *phronesis* works, and on the link between *nous*, *ethismos*, and the grasp of general ends: “although Aristotle holds that we acquire the virtues through habituation of emotion and desire, such habituation results in a rational recognition of the appropriateness of the actions and ends desired” (Russell 2009, 6. See also Sorabji 1980, 216; Price 2005, 274). Furthermore, in support of such view there is what Aristotle says at NE VI 1141 b15-17: “Nor is wisdom *only* concerned with *universals*: to be wise, one must *also* be familiar with the particular, since wisdom has to do with action, and the sphere of action is constituted by particulars” (my italics).

Finally, as pointed out, e.g., by Berti, it is possible to envisage throughout the Nicomachean Ethics and especially at the beginning of Book I, the idea of practical philosophy conceived as distinct from *phronesis*, and, more specifically, as a form of science⁴. This would mean acknowledging a habit of theoretical reason, even if a practical one, which has its end in the good action and has a degree of rigour inferior to that of theoretical sciences. According to this reading, “practical philosophy would be the science of the supreme good for man, that is happiness – the full flourishing of all human capabilities-, which is determined by means of a dialectical discussion with the thesis of the various philosophers” (Berti 2005,1). The role of such science would be that of elaborating general principles, even if with a certain degree of flexibility, and guiding *phronesis* in its knowledge of particulars. This kind of general knowledge, whose limits Aristotle clearly acknowledges, but whose status as science he seems to preserve, is often overlooked by readings focused on the perception of particulars.

Conclusion

In sum, I have made an attempt to show that there are a number of good intrinsically Aristotelian reasons to preserve both *phronesis*' capacity of dealing with particulars, perceiving them in their contingent detail, and its openness to the knowledge of general ends, whether it is provided by *nous*, *ethismos* or practical science. If this is true, Aristotle can be said to be a “qualified generalist”, i.e., a generalist who takes the salvation of contingent very seriously. I would like to conclude by quoting Kristjánsson 2013, 159: “There are generalists like myself who believe *phronesis* involves reasoning, based on general first principles delineated in Aristotle's ethical works, about one's

⁴ On the distinction between *phronesis* and practical philosophy, see also Berti 1989.

appropriate and rational combinations of desires and beliefs. Such generalists readily concede that although the verdicts of *phronesis* will be acutely context-sensitive and only problematically codifiable, they are not essentially uncodifiable”.

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