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Perception in Aristotle's Ethics

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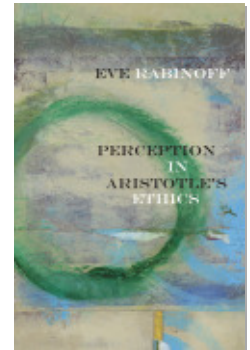
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CHAPTER 4

Phronēsis

I have offered an account of human perception, that is, an account of the nature of perception considered as a part of an intellectual soul. I argued that human perception is shaped by one's habits of understanding, one's intellectual habits, as, for example, a botanist's sight of a tree will hold a significance that differs from a hiker's sight of the same tree. What this shows is that the character of one's perception may be shaped by one's intellectual habits—one may come to perceive intellectually. In an ethical context, I argued that becoming virtuous consists precisely in developing the capacity to perceive intellectually; the aim of ethical development is to accomplish a harmony of soul, a result that is achieved by bringing the perceptive part of the soul under the guidance of intellect. As our analysis of *akrasia* showed, what this means, concretely, is to develop the capacity to perceive the present as a moment in the broader temporal context of a whole life. An akratic agent is beholden to the mere present, whereas a virtuous person apprehends the greater significance of what she perceives at present. In this section, I will confirm this analysis of the psychological underpinnings of virtue by addressing the virtue of *phronēsis*, "practical wisdom." I will argue that *phronēsis* is, in part, the developed capacity for perceiving well.

Naturally, perception occurs within and is shaped by the contingent features of the perceiver: the pizza smells good when one is hungry; the wine tastes bitter when one is ill. In its natural (i.e., undeveloped) state, then, perception gains access to the apparent good, distinct (for humans, at least) from the true good that is understood intellectually (*Nic. Eth.* 1139b12–13). For nonrational animals, nature assures that the apparent good—what appears good to the animal—is in fact good for the animal, for the most part and for healthy whole creatures. My cat does not have a problem with overeating because her hunger accurately leads her to eat a sufficient and only sufficient amount of food. For humans, though, there is no such guidance (or at least such guidance is severely limited and easily overturned); instead (or for the most part) we must guide *ourselves* to pursue what is truly good for us.

Nothing assures the coincidence of the apparent good with the true good for humans except the virtue that we ourselves develop. Indeed, we have so little assurance about the cohesion of these two goods that we do not even have a secure idea about what the nature of the true good is—is happiness fame and fortune? or pleasure? or honor?

This distinction between the apparent good and the true good corresponds to the distinction between perception and intellect: perception grasps the apparent good and intellect grasps the true good. The problem is to bring the apparent good into alignment with the true good, the perceived good into correspondence with the intellected good. Not only is it expedient to align the perceived good with the intellected good so as to avoid the akratic state of being of two minds about how one ought to act, it is also necessary if the true good is to be realized in action in the first place. The proper object of intellect is the unchanging universal, but the realm of action—the realm of ethics—is particular and variable. In order for the true good to be realized in action it must be adjusted and particularized. *Phronēsis*, I will argue, fulfills precisely this function: it is knowledge particularized, or, what is the same thing, it is the capacity for intellectual perception. Specifically, *phronēsis* is a manner of perceiving that is both articulate enough to be sensitive to and discerning of the ethically relevant features, and flexible and open enough to be determined by deliberation.

Introduction: The Limit of *Logos* and the Apprehension of the Particular

The task Aristotle sets for himself in book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is to define the *orthos logos*, the “right reason,” that identifies the middle course (*to meson*) at which virtue aims (1138b18–20, 1138b32–34; see also 1106b14–18, 1106b27–28).¹ Immediately upon introducing this question, Aristotle turns his attention to the intellectual virtues (1139a1). Although this seems to some to be a detour, by the end of book VI Aristotle identifies *phronēsis* as the *orthos logos* of virtue: “For virtue is not only the characteristic that accords with correct reason [*kata ton orthon logon*], but also the one that is accompanied by [*meta*] correct reason. And *phronēsis* is the *orthos logos* concerning such sorts of things” (1144b26–28). In what follows, I will address the question of how and in what sense *phronēsis* is the answer to the opening question of book VI. I will argue that *phronēsis* is a state of soul characterized by the *orthos logos* in the sense of being the power or condition for good practical reason, and it is such by being perceptively sensitive to the particulars of the situation in which one must act.

The reason it is necessary to define the *orthos logos*, Aristotle tells us at the opening of book VI, is to specify the knowledge of the sorts of things virtue aims at (*Nic. Eth.* 1138b25–34). It is rather empty to know only that one ought to act according to right reason—if all one knew was that virtue aims at the mean that accords with the *orthos logos*, “he would be no further ahead in his knowledge—for example, he would not know what sorts of things ought to be applied to the body if somebody should say, ‘so many things as the art of medicine commands and as he who possesses that art commands.’” However, it seems that we are left with exactly this kind of thing: if the *orthos logos* is *phronēsis*, then we are left with the result that what sorts of acts are virtuous are just those that the *phronimos* identifies. This is exactly what Aristotle already gave us in the definition of virtue in II.6 1106b36–1107a2. The question, then, is: how does an understanding of *phronēsis* provide content to the understanding of virtue?

If one is keeping in mind what the middle course consists in, what Aristotle means to do by defining the *orthos logos* may seem a bit of a puzzle. Aristotle introduces the idea that virtue aims at a middle course in book II, after reminding his listener that arguments (*logoi*) concerning ethics do not admit of precision since “matters of action and those pertaining to what is advantageous have nothing stationary about them” (*Nic. Eth.* 1104a4). This imprecision of ethical arguments is due to the nature of action, which is concerned with particulars (1141b16),² yet “still less precise is the argument [*logos*] concerned with particulars, for it does not fall under an art or any sort of precepts” (1104a6–7).³ There is, in other words, a limit to what *logos*, argument or reason, can attain concerning the particulars with which virtue is concerned, yet the middle course that the virtuous act attains must be determined with reference to the particulars the virtuous agent faces.⁴ Aristotle goes so far as to say that, rather than follow an argument, “those who act ought themselves always to examine what pertains to the opportune moment [when it presents itself]” (1104a8–9). Because action is tied to flexible particulars, it seems more important that the virtuous person be able to read (so to speak) the virtuous middle course off the present particulars than to have the right reason or argument about—an *orthos logos* of—the middle course. One may reasonably decide, for example, to be courageous in battle by standing one’s ground, but being courageous may end up requiring abandoning that plan (and the reasoning that led to it). Perhaps paradoxically, virtue requires the flexibility *not* to abide by one’s own reason, should the situation call for it. It is not *irrational* to abandon one’s plan, should the situation call for it; rather, the rationality that determines the middle course is broader than having the right argument because it includes the flexibility to decide

or determine whether one's reasoning applies in particular circumstances. But this raises the question: if the *orthos logos* identifies the middle, which—because it is wrapped up with particulars—cannot be precisely determined by argument, what is Aristotle after in defining the *orthos logos*?

I propose that what Aristotle aims to specify is the *power* or *capacity* for right reason in ethical matters: what makes it possible to reason well about action and what produces such reasoning.⁵ “*Phronēsis* is the *orthos logos*,” then, does not mean being in possession of good and true arguments; rather, it means being the condition for and power of (good, correct) practical thinking.⁶ It is such a power, at least in part, I will argue, by being receptive to particulars as significant in specific ways to the present situation and the ethical decision to be made; by correctly apprehending the particulars *about which* one thinks and *with respect to which* one chooses the middle course and the virtuous action, one is able to reason well about what to choose. There is flexibility to the way that a situation appears to one, and as a result one can simply *fail to notice* or fail to be struck by relevant details.⁷ Good practical reasoning requires an initial sensitivity to the circumstances one finds oneself in, and I will argue that *phronēsis* makes possible good practical reasoning just by providing this correct apprehension of particulars.

The sensitivity to the particulars of one's present circumstance exceeds being receptive to new reasons that figure into one's practical thinking, and abandoning one's plans in the appropriate moment does not necessarily mean that one discovers new reasons when one is called upon to act that one failed to anticipate. Rather, the present moment has ethically relevant features that *cannot* be anticipated and therefore fall outside the realm of argument. Generally, the point that the present in which one acts has features that cannot be anticipated is recognizable from ordinary experience: it is the reason an actor gets nervous before a performance or a speaker fears becoming tongue-tied at the crucial moment. Despite having decided and prepared in advance exactly what to do, one simply is not guaranteed that one will successfully execute the performance.⁸

This general feature of action seems to be what Aristotle is pointing toward in his rejection of universal ethical rules and his emphasis on the variability of the particulars of action. For example, Aristotle does not consider Sophocles's Neoptolemus to be akratic for failing to abide by his decision to lie to Philoctetes (*Nic. Eth.* 1151b17–22). Neoptolemus had been persuaded by Odysseus that the right thing to do was to lie to Philoctetes, which is to say that Neoptolemus had decided upon the right course of action as the conclusion of an argument. But when it comes to the moment of action, Neoptolemus does not lie to Philoctetes. The reason this does not constitute

an akratic abandonment of reason, Aristotle explains, is that Neoptolemus fails to abide by his reason on account of a noble pleasure, pleasure in telling the truth. Aristotle does not say that Neoptolemus was *wrong* to have been persuaded by Odysseus to lie to Philoctetes and he does not explain his new course of action as adopting a *new* argument or a new reason. Rather, it seems, Neoptolemus's sensitivity to Philoctetes's suffering brings into relief the pain of lying to him and prompts Neoptolemus to act on account of the pleasure of truth telling. Neoptolemus may have even taken into account Philoctetes's suffering and his own distaste for lying in making his decision to lie, but the way the *present* situation *actually* speaks to him dictates a different course of action. If the situation speaks well to Neoptolemus, he is right to answer its call. Aristotle does not consider it *irrational* for Neoptolemus to abandon his plan at this appropriate moment, and this shows that the rationality that determines the middle course is broader than having the right argument because it includes the flexibility to see whether one's reasoning applies in particular circumstances. Were he less insightfully sensitive to Philoctetes's character and suffering, he would not have been led to abandon his decision to lie. If he had seen Philoctetes as a dangerous, deranged, cursed person (as Odysseus had led him to believe), he would not have been prompted to the noble act that he in fact undertook.⁹ A contrasting example is that of Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse, who, because she views the particulars of her circumstances (particular expressions, conversations, behaviors, etc.) with a certain interpretation already in mind (that Mr. Elton loves Harriet), is blind to the particular acts and intentions of those around her and as a result causes great suffering to those she cares about most. Having decided in advance what one ought to do may interfere with seeing the particulars truthfully.

Several times in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, Aristotle emphasizes that *phronēsis* is concerned with the particular (1141b14–16, 1142a14–16, 1142a23–30, 1143a25–29, 1143a32–35).¹⁰ Apprehending particulars is the defining mark of perception, according to Aristotle's account of this power in *De anima* (II.6 417b21–23, 417b27), and carried over into the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1112b34–1113a2, 1142a26–27, 1143b4–5), and as a result we might expect *phronēsis* to involve some sort of perception. Aristotle makes good on this expectation when in VI.9 he likens *phronēsis* to a kind of perception (1142a23–30). A couple of questions arise, however, if *phronēsis* is a kind of perception: first, what sense does it make to say that *phronēsis* is the power to *perceive* particulars in an ethically significant way? The proper objects of perception are such things as colors and shapes, not such things as the goodness or badness of a particular. Moreover, *phronēsis* is an *intellectual* virtue, not

a virtue of the perceptual part of the soul.¹¹ Second, if *phronēsis* is a kind of perception, in what sense is it an *orthos logos*?

I will argue that the correct apprehension of the ethical particular is a function of the combined powers of intellect and perception, and specifically that *phronēsis* transforms the mean of perception that characterizes perception as a whole (*De anima* 431a20) into an *ethical* mean of perception.¹² This will answer both the question of how an intellectual virtue crosses into the territory of perception, and the sense in which *phronēsis* is the *orthos logos*. The mean of perception is also a *logos* in the sense that it is an appropriate ratio of the terms that define each sense—the mean of vision, for example, is an appropriate ratio of white and black—and *phronēsis* is a *logos* in the same sense. In sum, my thesis has two parts: (1) *phronēsis* is the *orthos logos* of virtue because it enables the virtuous person to correctly perceive the particulars with respect to which she acts; and this means perceiving particulars in their relevance to one's particular ethical aims, and (2) *phronēsis* does this by providing perception with the terms by which it is receptive of ethical particulars, operating as an intellectually informed mean of perception.

1. *Phronēsis*

Let me begin with some initial remarks about Aristotle's discussion of *phronēsis* in VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's primary focus in book VI seems to be on intellect's contribution to action. That this is his concern is indicated, first, by the reason he offers for needing to define the *orthos logos* of virtue, referred to above: one who knows only that she ought to act according to the *orthos logos* will not know how, specifically, to act at all (1138b29–32). Second, the work of VI.2 is to introduce practical thinking as distinct from theoretical thinking and as necessary for action: "Now, thinking itself moves nothing, but thinking that is for the sake of something and concerned with action does, for it rules over [*archein*] production as well" (1139a35–b1).

Having marked out practical thinking as his focus, Aristotle proceeds to identify and discuss the intellectual virtue responsible for *good* practical thinking.¹³ *Phronēsis* is just such an intellectual virtue. *Phronēsis* is "a true *hexis* bound up with action, accompanied by reason, and concerned with things that are good or bad for a human being" (*Nic. Eth.* 1140b4–6). *Phronēsis* is a state of soul that *makes possible* the sort of thinking necessary for good action.

What sort of state makes practical reasoning possible? It is telling that *phronēsis* is a state of soul *accompanied by* reason: this suggests that *phronēsis* is not *simply* the activity of practical reason, but also the condition for it.

Aristotle acknowledges that *phronēsis* is something more than reason when he notes that “*phronēsis* is not solely a state accompanied by reason, a sign of which is that it is possible to forget such a state, but not to forget *phronēsis*” (*Nic. Eth.* 1140b28–30). By using the term “state” (*hexis*) Aristotle seems to be referring to the person who has learned, say, geometry, that is, a person with the first actuality of geometrical knowledge. It is possible for a geometer to *forget* his knowledge of geometry, regressing to the stage wherein he has only the first potentiality for knowledge of geometry. To lose one’s geometry *hexis* would just be to forget the content of geometry, its axioms and proofs. But it is not possible to forget *phronēsis*, and this suggests that it is a different sort of *hexis* than the geometry *hexis*, a sort of *hexis* that exceeds the content of reason. I take this to mean that *phronēsis* offers a *way of seeing* that makes possible good reasoning. In this way, *phronēsis* is rather like the state of mind that makes it possible to enjoy visual art: one may forget what Picasso’s *The Old Guitarist* looks like, but the way of seeing that makes one appreciate such a work is not forgotten. Similarly, one may forget the *reasons* one chose to stand one’s ground in battle, but the way of seeing that made those reasons salient is not forgotten.

That *phronēsis* is a state of seeing well in addition to a state with reason is borne out in the discussions of *phronēsis* that follow. Aristotle maintains, on the one hand, that *phronēsis* is a supposition (*hupolēpsis*)¹⁴ of the principle of action, in the sense of being a supposition of that for the sake of which the action is undertaken (*Nic. Eth.* 1140b11–17). At a later moment, he connects this supposition with deliberation: *phronēsis* is a true supposition of the end with respect to which one deliberates well (1142b31–33). Similarly, the *phronimos* is described, on the one hand, as one who is able to deliberate well (1140a25–28, see also 1141b9–10). On the other hand, Aristotle maintains that *phronēsis* is a kind of perception because it is concerned with particulars, which are not captured by *logoi* (1142a23–30), and he describes the *phronimos* as one who *sees* correctly the particulars of action (1143b4–14, esp. 1143b11–14). It appears, then, that *phronēsis* is a state of soul with a twofold ability: to see the particulars well, and to hold the true supposition of the aim of action.

Aristotle addresses the gap between having a *logos* and acting well with respect to particulars in the distinction he draws between experience (*empeiria*) and art (*technē*) at the opening of the *Metaphysics*. Experience is oriented toward the particular, whereas art is possession of a universal:

And art comes into being whenever, out of many conceptions from experience, one universal judgment [*hupolēpsis*] arises about those

things that are similar. For to have a judgment [*hupolēpsis*] that this thing was beneficial to Callias when he was sick with this disease, and to Socrates, and one by one in this way to many people, belongs to experience. But the judgment that it was beneficial to all such people, marked out as being of one kind, when they were sick with this disease . . . belongs to art. (*Met.* 981a5–12)¹⁵

Those with experience, he goes on to say, are more effective in action than those who have a *logos* but have no experience (*Met.* 981a12–15), for the reason that action concerns the particular:

Experience is familiarity [*gnōsis*] with things that are particular, but art with those that are universal, while actions [*praxeis*] and all becoming are concerned with what is particular. For the doctor does not cure a human being except incidentally, but Callias or Socrates or any of the others called by such a name, who happens to be a human being. So if someone without experience has the reasoned account [*logos*] and is familiar with the universal, but is ignorant of what is particular within it, he will often go astray in his treatment, since what is treated is particular. (*Met.* 981a15–24)

What is important for art is the way many particulars are the same, but what is important for treating a sick person is the way that person is unique: one treats “human being” only incidentally to treating Socrates. This is not to say that Socrates is not amenable to certain kinds of *logoi*—he *is* a human being, with certain features and a certain history—and having these *logoi* will help one treat him. But neither is Socrates identical with these *logoi*, and a treatment that was successful once may not be successful again. The matter is similar in the case of ethical action. One will have certain *logoi*—certain principles, certain aims, certain familiarity with people, and so on—but these *logoi* will only *aid* in acting well, they will not ensure it. One must also be open to the particular as it exceeds what is captured in a *logos*. Again, the case of Jane Austen’s *Emma* is illustrative here: *Emma*’s *logos* of her circumstances, her hypothesis that Mr. Elton is in love with her friend Harriet, obstructs her vision of Mr. Elton’s behavior. But being attuned to behaviors that signify esteem or love—having a *logos* of love—would ordinarily be an aid to seeing what is happening.

The twofold character of *phronēsis*, I will argue, has this kind of structure. The *phronimos* perceives the particulars well and has the right supposition of the aim, and these are mutually informing: for the aim to be right, it must be

responsive to particulars, and to perceive the particulars well, one's perception must be informed by one's aims. It will be in this sense that *phronēsis* is the *orthos logos*: a state of soul wherein perception is informed by an ethical mean.

2. Virtue and *Phronēsis*

It may seem more natural to assign the capacity to apprehend ethical particulars to the nonrational part of the soul and say that one perceives well by virtue of having good character. Virtue of character is the good state of the nonrational part of the soul that makes one apt to feel passion appropriately (*Nic. Eth.* 1106b16–18), and it is natural to think of the kind of sensitivity that is necessary for ethical reasoning to be a matter of feeling appropriate passions—being struck with horror at the sight of violence, for example. Moreover, passions are those things that are accompanied by pleasure and pain (1105b21–23), and the latter are activities of the perceptual part of the soul (*De anima* 431a10–11, see also 413b23). Finally, Aristotle defines virtue of character as a state of soul that makes one apt to hit the middle course (*Nic. Eth.* 1116b15–16). For these reasons (and perhaps others), one might hold that it is virtue of character, not the intellectual virtue of *phronēsis*, that gains sight of the significance of ethical particulars.¹⁶

However, Aristotle's discussion of *phronēsis* in VI challenges the thesis that it is virtue of character that is responsible for perceiving well in two respects. First, Aristotle explicitly identifies *phronēsis* with perception (*Nic. Eth.* 1142a23–30), and, second, Aristotle characterizes virtue without *phronēsis* as a blind person, stumbling toward what she thinks is good but causing harm instead (1144b8–12); similarly Aristotle characterizes *phronēsis* as the “eye of the soul” (1144a29–30). Both of these suggest that it is *phronēsis* that provides the sight of the practical good in its particularity, not virtue of character.¹⁷ (I elaborate both of these points below.)

Aristotle addresses the issue of the relationship of virtue of character and *phronēsis* at the conclusion of book VI, when he considers the question of why *phronēsis* is useful in producing right action (*Nic. Eth.* 1143b18–19). He offers two justifications for the question. First, good actions are the deliverances of having the right state (*hexis*), that is, the right virtue, and “we are not more skilled in the actions that correspond to [for example] health by possessing the arts of medicine and gymnastic training” (1143b21–28). If, for example, it is because one is courageous, having been habituated to endure frightening things, that the courageous person is especially capable of performing courageous actions (1104a35–1104b3), there seems to be no role for *phronēsis* to play in effectively producing good actions.

Second, even if one were to claim that *phronēsis* is not necessary for the *performance* of the courageous action of the courageous person, but that it is nonetheless necessary for the *development* of courage, it would then not be necessary to become *phronimos* oneself: one could simply obey one who is *phronimos*. “For it will make no difference whether they themselves have *phronēsis* or obey others who have it, and that would be enough for us, just as it is also in what concerns health: although we wish to be healthy, nonetheless we do not learn the art of medicine” (*Nic. Eth.* 1143b28–33). If nonrational virtue is itself sufficient to produce virtuous actions, this renders *phronēsis*, understood as an *intellectual* state concerning the good and the bad for human beings (1140b4–6), superfluous.

Aristotle rejects the idea that *phronēsis* is not useful for producing virtuous action; he will argue, to the contrary, that there is no nonrational virtue *without* *phronēsis* (1144b30–32). Both of the objections to the utility of *phronēsis* for the production of virtuous action that he raises stem from a particular vision of nonrational virtue that Aristotle must reject, as I will argue that he does. The objectionable vision of nonrational virtue is that according to which nonrational virtue contains its own measure and serves as its own guide, just as a simply natural living creature does. An oak, for example, has its measure internal to it in the sense that it grows to maturity on its own; even if it had the capacity of intellect, it would still do it no good to *know* that it ought to grow to forty feet high because that measure is already programmed (so to speak) in its nonrational soul. On this view, if nonrational virtue contains its own measure, it is enough to *be* courageous, that is, to have the nonrational habit of facing fearful situations, in order to stand one’s ground in battle when appropriate. It will not help to also *know* that courage dictates standing one’s ground in this particular situation. If one adopts this vision of nonrational virtue, the utility of *phronēsis* will indeed be cast into doubt. Furthermore, if one accepts this vision of nonrational virtue, then it would be immaterial whether one follows one’s own *phronēsis* or that of another in developing virtue; *phronēsis* will, in any case, be rendered superfluous by the accomplishment of virtue of character, and so it is not necessary to have it oneself. Nonrational virtue, on this vision, is self-guiding *in itself*—it need not draw on another power in order to determine or produce the actions that manifest virtue—and so the development of this self-guiding capacity need not be the implementation of some other power in one’s own soul rather than that of another person.

This question of the utility of *phronēsis*, and the vision of nonrational virtue that gives rise to it, are consequences of an important move that Aristotle makes at the outset of his account of virtue in book II of the *Nicomachean*

Ethics. In the second chapter, Aristotle sets aside the qualification that virtuous action is *kata ton orthon logon*:

It is necessary to examine matters pertaining to actions, that is, how one ought to perform them. For these actions have authoritative control over what sorts of characteristics come into being, just as we have said. Now, “acting in accord with correct reason” is commonly granted, and let it be posited for now—what pertains to it will be spoken of later, both what “correct reason” is and how it relates to the virtues. (*Nic. Eth.* 1103b29–34)

Aristotle’s account of virtue in books II–V thus *seems* to say that virtue of character in itself produces virtuous action, without the intellectual input that supplies the *orthos logos*. In II.4, for example, Aristotle argues that a virtuous act is one that proceeds from a certain condition, namely, (a) acting knowingly, (b) choosing and choosing the act for its own sake, and (c) being in a steady state. But he continues by noting that for virtue of character “knowledge has little or no force, whereas the other two criteria amount to not a small part but rather the whole affair—criteria that are in fact met as a result of our doing just and moderate things many times” (*Nic. Eth.* 1105b2–5). This pronouncement appears to support the notion of virtue of character as self-sufficient, in the absence of intellectual input. Yet Aristotle finds it necessary to invoke intellect even in the account of the virtues of character: choice is, of course, a rational desire productive of action that results from deliberation (III.2–3). Moreover, when Aristotle defines virtue in II.6, he includes the *phronimos* in the definition: virtue is “a state marked by choice [*hexis probairetikē*], residing in the mean [*mesotēs*] relative to us defined by reason and as the *phronimos* would define it” (1106b36–1107a2). And so we see that Aristotle does indeed invoke intellectual input even in the account of virtue of character, and this unsettles the appearance of virtue of character as sufficient *in itself* to produce virtuous action.¹⁸

In order, then, to show that *phronēsis* is indeed useful for producing virtuous action, Aristotle must reject the vision of virtue in which virtue of character contains its own measure and serves as its own guide. Aristotle’s response does so and more. His response to the question of the utility of *phronēsis* is that virtue and *phronēsis* mutually require one another: *phronēsis* cannot be what it is in the absence of virtue, nor can virtue be what it is in the absence of *phronēsis*. “It is clear, then, on the basis of what has been said, that it is not possible to be good in the authoritative sense in the absence of *phronēsis*, nor is it possible to be *phronimos* in the absence of moral virtue”

(*Nic. Eth.* 1144b30–32). I will for the moment only address the insufficiency of virtue without *phronēsis*.¹⁹ Aristotle argues for the necessity of *phronēsis* by introducing a distinction between natural virtue and virtue in the authoritative sense (*kuria*). Natural virtues are present in children and beasts, but “they are manifestly harmful in the absence of intellect . . . just as a strong body moving without eyesight will end up stumbling with considerable force because it is without sight, so it is also in this case” (1144b8–12). Aristotle specifies that the form of intellect that transforms this blind natural virtue into true virtue is *phronēsis* (1144b16–17). Clearly, then, Aristotle envisions *phronēsis* as a sort of sight by which the motive force of virtue is guided (see 1143b11–14).²⁰

Natural virtue, as Aristotle depicts it, seems to be a right intention that goes wrong; a disposition to be just that fails to deliver just acts (or if it succeeds, it does so on the basis of chance rather than virtue). Such a good-hearted yet foolish disposition is a familiar trope in literature (my example of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, who, despite good intentions, causes harm to a dear friend, fits the bill): one who tries to do right but, due to a failure to understand the specificities that define the situation within which one acts, goes terribly wrong. Aristotle describes just such an occurrence in his consideration of acting on account of ignorance in *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1. Ignorance of particulars may cause great harm, as occurs if “one suppose[s] that his own son is an enemy, just as Merope did, that the pointed spear has been blunted, or that the stone is pumice. Or, by giving someone a drink to save him, one might kill him. Or wishing only to touch, as sparring partners do, someone might land a blow” (1111a11–15). If *phronēsis* is that which provides the sight of a well-meaning intention that otherwise goes wrong, as Merope goes wrong, we may infer that the sight that *phronēsis* provides is a correct apprehension of such particulars of action, which Aristotle lists generally as “who acts, what he does, with respect to what or in what circumstances, and sometimes also with what (for example, with an instrument), for the sake of what (for example, preservation), and how (for example, gently or violently)” (1111a3–6).

That it is *phronēsis* that apprehends the particulars of action is confirmed by Aristotle’s repeated insistence, throughout VI, that *phronēsis* is concerned with particulars (*Nic. Eth.* 1141b14–16, 1142a14–16, 1142a23–30, 1143a25–29, 1143a32–35). What sort of apprehension is this? The correct apprehension of particulars may be understood as correctly identifying objects, that is, correctly subsuming the particular blunted spear under the genus “practice weapon.” Of course, this kind of identification must be involved in the correct apprehension of particulars, but it cannot be the whole story. As we saw

above, there is a gap between having the *logos* and acting well, which Aristotle expresses in terms of the difference between experience and art (*Met.* I.1 981a12–24). Aristotle makes a similar point in the *Nicomachean Ethics* VI discussion of *phronēsis* (1141b14–21), offering as a case where experience is more effective than art that of the experienced person knowing that poultry is healthful, whereas the artist knows that light meats are healthful. In order to produce health, it is necessary to identify the meat that is light, which is to identify poultry in general and also particular pieces of poultry; but this identification is not achieved by having the *logos* “light meat is healthful” by itself. Moreover, it is also necessary to determine whether in this case light meat is the right choice, how much the sick person ought to eat, or whether it would be better to refrain from eating at all. In other words, identifying the “with what” of action is inseparable from identifying the “how,” and the “how” in any particular case is a matter of judgment, not *technē*. Aristotle insists that these are matters of judgment concerning the particulars of action, and this kind of judgment is a matter of perception, not a matter of *logos* (1109b20–24). This suggests that *phronēsis* is not merely the perception *that* this meat is chicken, but an ongoing perceptual responsiveness to the particularities of the patient that dictate whether and in what quantity this chicken ought to be consumed. Having experience or *technē* opens up the context within which a judgment is made, but it does not determine the judgment itself. For example, having experience healing people or having the medical art will offer chicken as a solution to Socrates’s illness, but it is up to the judgment of the healer to appropriately apply (or refrain from applying) this solution.

We may see this point more clearly if we take Aristotle’s example of the sparring partners. The sparring partners understand that the “how” of practice sparring is “not too hard, not too soft; a touch, not a hit.” They will also be able to inspect their spears to be sure that the “what” they are operating with are blunted spears. But achieving the touch appropriate to sparring (as opposed to battle) will depend upon other factors, such as how heavy the weapon is, how quickly the sparring partner moves, how far away he is, and so on. These are things that one can understand in a general way, but achieving the right level of force will require that one be perceptively responsive to the particulars as they occur. We see a similar point in learning how to dance, especially a partner dance such as swing: one may be told to hold oneself a certain way, to move one’s feet a certain way, and so on. But actually dancing well will require that one respond to one’s partner’s movements *as they occur* and that one dance as the music moves one to dance. To identify these particulars is not only to subsume them under their genera, but also to be responsive to them in their particularity in the moment. Nussbaum

offers a further example, that of telling a joke—following a rulebook to tell a joke would inevitably fail, because a joke is successful only in being tailored to the concrete situation.²¹ The phronetic apprehension of particulars is an apprehension of them as an element of a present, ongoing situation, and discerning, perceptually, their appropriateness to the ongoing situation.

Phronēsis is especially concerned with one kind of particular named in Aristotle's list: the "for the sake of what" of action. In VI.5 Aristotle indicates, in a somewhat roundabout way, that *phronēsis* identifies that for the sake of which one acts. Moderation, he asserts, the virtue concerning pleasure and pain, preserves *phronēsis*, "for it is not every supposition that the pleasant and painful ruin and distort . . . but rather those suppositions concerning action. For the sources of action are that for the sake of which the actions are undertaken, but to someone who has been ruined on account of pleasure or pain, the *principle immediately fails to appear*—it is not manifest to him that he ought to choose all things and to act for the sake of this and on account of this" (*Nic. Eth.* 1140b13–19, my emphasis).²² *Phronēsis*, the supposition protected by moderation, is a supposition about that for the sake of which the action is undertaken.²³

It might seem a little surprising to find the for-the-sake-of-which on the list of the particulars in which action consists. Aristotle's example of preservation is not obviously particular; rather, it is that at which all living things aim. Similarly, virtuous actions are undertaken for their own sake, that is, for the sake of virtue, for the sake of acting well, for the sake of the *kalon*, and for the sake of *eudaimonia*. To act for the sake of virtue, then, seems to require a general conception of what virtue *is*, perhaps what *eudaimonia* is.²⁴ In what sense, then, is the for-the-sake-of-which of action a particular? It is particular insofar as action itself is particular—an action *of* a particular person *in* a particular situation, and all the rest of the particulars listed in III.1—and since the for-the-sake-of-which of virtuous action is internal to the action itself, *it too* is particular. Similarly, that for the sake of which one builds a house is a *particular* house; a particular instance of the universal, house.

The difference between that particular house, however, and the particular virtuous action is that the variation in particular qualities of the house does not alter its being a house—whether the house is red or yellow, two stories or four, open concept or railroad layout, whether wood or brick—whereas the particularities of the action *do* alter the nature of the action. To land a blow when sparring is a different act than merely to touch one's partner. The particular house does not *consist* in its particularities—it will be a house even if gutted and redesigned—but the virtuous action *does* consist in its particularities—to alter the particulars is to alter the action. As Aristotle says,

phronēsis must be especially acquainted with particulars (more than universals), because “it is bound up with action, and action concerns the particulars” (*Nic. Eth.* 1141b14ff.).

In the case of virtue, the Lesbian rule is a fitting model: the rule must bend to fit the particulars, not the particulars to the rule. “For the rule [or measure] of something indeterminate is indeterminate too, just as is the case with the lead rule used in house building in Lesbos: the lead rule changes in relation to the shape of the stone and does not stay the same; and so too the specific decree changes in relation to the matter at hand” (*Nic. Eth.* 1137b30–32).²⁵ The parallel with virtue runs as follows: determining the aim of a virtuous act requires the flexibility to adjust one’s aim to fit the particulars, rather than to adjust the particulars to fit one’s universal ethical dictum. To accomplish such flexibility, one must let the particulars *speak* to one, and it is this that *phronēsis* accomplishes.

I conclude from these considerations that *phronēsis* guides virtue by identifying the for-the-sake-of-which of action in *specific* circumstances. Virtue provides (at least)²⁶ the general inclination to be, say, just, and *phronēsis* specifies this inclination by identifying the *particular* aim of action here and now (for example, not giving back a sword to one in a frenzy [as in *Republic* I]).²⁷

3. *Phronēsis* and Perception

I will return later to the idea that *phronēsis* guides virtue by identifying the particular for-the-sake-of-which of action, and turn now to the thesis that *phronēsis* is good or true perception. There are two textual justifications for pursuing the hypothesis that *phronēsis* is perceiving well. First, there is Aristotle’s insertion of the *phronimos* into the definition of virtue as the arbiter of the mean (*Nic. Eth.* 1106b36–1107a2), understood as the appropriate respect, manner, time, and so on in feeling and action (1106b16–24). Aristotle later remarks that whether a person is blameworthy for departing too much from the mean is discerned by perception (1109b20–22).²⁸ If departure from the mean is discerned by perception, it stands to reason that the discernment of the mean is also achieved by perception. Second, Aristotle explicitly likens *phronēsis* to perception on the basis of its being concerned with particulars more than with universals (1142a23–30). If *phronēsis* is perceiving well it will, of course, not be perception in the sense of perception of special or common perceptibles, but a rather new and sophisticated kind of perception, one, I will argue, that is informed already by intellect. We will see that the kind of perception at play in this passage is an intellectually informed perception.

We may reiterate at the outset that perceiving well is only one of the accomplishments of *phronēsis*. To be *phronimos* is to be skilled at acting virtuously, and to decide upon the right action requires more than good perception. In VI.7, Aristotle notes that *phronēsis* is said to be concerned with “the human things about which it is possible to deliberate” (*Nic. Eth.* 1141b8–9), and in this passage we are about to examine he says that it is of the ultimate particular (*tou heskatou*) of which there is no *logos* but only a perception. These two objects are distinct: in III.3, Aristotle expressly declares that there is no deliberation about the objects of perception (1112b32–1113a2). This indicates that *phronēsis* has two functions: to be receptive of the particulars *with respect to which* one deliberates, and to thereby deliberate well about *how to act* with respect to those particulars.

Phronēsis Is a Kind of Perception (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a23–30)

Aristotle characterizes *phronēsis* as perception in a (much discussed) passage in VI.8:

And that *phronēsis* is not science is manifest: *phronēsis* concerns the ultimate particular thing [*to eschaton*], as was said, for the action performed is of this kind. Indeed, *phronēsis* corresponds to [*anti-keisthai*] intellect, for intellect is of the defining boundaries [*horos*], of which there is no rational account [*logos*]; and *phronēsis* is of the ultimate particular thing [*eschaton*], of which there is not a science but rather a perception [*aisthēsis*], and a perception not of things peculiar to one of the senses, but a perception of the sort by which we perceive that the ultimate particular thing [*eschaton*], in mathematics, is a triangle. For here too there will be a stop. But this is perception rather more than *phronēsis*, though perception of a form different from that [of one of the senses]. (*Nic. Eth.* 1142a23–30)²⁹

This passage declares that *phronēsis* is of those things of which there is only perception, but not perception in the strict sense of the faculty receptive to proper perceptibles like color, sound, smell, and taste. It is, instead, an intellectually informed perception. It would be absurd to attribute a perception of a triangle *as* the ultimate figure in mathematics to a nonrational animal.³⁰ To perceive the triangle in this way requires, at least, that one be familiar with mathematics as a science, perhaps especially with geometry as a subset of mathematics. Analogously, then, to perceive the particulars of one’s circumstances as relevant to how one decides to act requires, minimally, some conception about what it is to be or do good.

We may perhaps push the analogy even further. If to perceive that a triangle is the ultimate figure in geometry is to perceive it as foundational in that science, in the sense that other figures may be built from the triangle, to perceive an ethical particular is to perceive it as that with respect to which one must act. The perception that the triangle is ultimate is a perception of a certain kind of significance that the triangle bears: the triangle is a basic term that marks off the field of geometry. A triangle is more than the ingredients of geometry—points, lines—it is the first figure, the first instance of a rectilinear shape with which geometry is concerned. The triangle is the minimal configuration of lines that has an intelligible structure; it is the first arrangement of (straight) lines that we can call a shape, and it signals the emergence into a new mathematical domain. In this sense, it is a stop.³¹ Similarly, *phronēsis* is the perception of a particular as having foundational significance in *its* domain, the domain of action.³² It will be more than perception of special or common perceptibles; it will be perception that a particular is a basic term in a situation requiring action. What this would amount to is perceiving a particular in terms of good and bad: one perceives not only a certain configuration of shapes and colors, but that this configuration is a person; and not only does one perceive that this is a person, but that this is a person in distress; and not only does one perceive that this is a person in distress, one perceives that it is bad for this person to be in distress and it would be good to remedy the distress.³³

This is a complex kind of perception, and it may be helpful to distinguish between the different levels of perception occurring here. There are, of course, the basic levels of perception operative here: perception of the special and common perceptibles such as colors and shapes, and the perception of the incidental perceptibles such as Philoctetes. Included in such perception of incidental perceptibles is the fact that Philoctetes is wailing. There is, further, the perception that Philoctetes is distressed—that he is not, say, putting on an act for the sake of his visitor, Neoptolemus, but is truly in distress. This may seem like a matter for judgment—one may, upon reflection, decide that Philoctetes was putting on an act. But to raise that question in the first place, one must be initially struck by something off about Philoctetes's wailing (unless one is generally suspicious of others, in which case the question reflects more upon one's own attitude than upon the other's expression). Finally, Neoptolemus perceives Philoctetes's wailing as an occasion for action. We may call this kind of perception a "caring perception." One may perceive a person in distress without perceiving this as a situation in which one is oneself implicated; in order to *act* with respect to some particular, one must perceive this particular in a caring way, not as a matter in

the world which has nothing to do with oneself. It may seem that these latter, complex levels of perception are not perceptions at all, but judgments. But let me point out that nonrational animals exhibit behaviors that would require such “judgments” without having the capacity for judgment. For example, when in heat a female cat will wail. Male cats will hear this, and will hear it not only as a sound, not only as a wail, but also as an occasion for mating. The male cat, too, has a kind of “caring perception.” This is not to say that the way Neoptolemus perceives Philoctetes’s wailing is simply the *same* as a cat’s perception—the sorts of actions that are available to Neoptolemus are more sophisticated and variable than those available to the cat—but it is consistent with it, which shows that the perceptual capacity makes the sorts of discernments we might be tempted to assign to intellectual judgment.

These kinds of perception, both the mathematical and the ethical, are not simple perceptions, not merely the reception of perceptible properties of some object of sense, but instead a perception informed by some knowledge or idea. The knowledge of geometry is not transmitted *by* the sight of the triangle, but it informs the perception of the triangle and enables the recognition of the triangle in its foundational position in geometry. In general, there is no perceptual awareness³⁴ *without* such organizing coordinates; perception is always informed by *some* contextualizing factor. This is true of perception in both rational and nonrational animals. Neither humans nor nonrational animals experience bare sensory qualities, but instead perceive objects as they bear upon the perceiver. For the nonrational animal, the objects of perception are informed by its project of self-preservation and reproduction. For example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle describes animal perception thus:

It is not the smell of hares that hounds enjoy but their meat, and the smell produces the perception [of the meat to be enjoyed]. The lion too enjoys not the sound of the cow’s voice, but the eating of the cow, though the fact that the cow was nearby he perceived through the sound of its voice, and so he appears to enjoy this. And, similarly, the lion does not take enjoyment because he sees “a deer or a goat in the fields,” but because he will have its meat. (*Nic. Eth.* III.10 1118a18–23)

The mere perception of smell (of the hare), or sound (of the cow), or sight (of the deer), is perceived by the animal in light of its desire to eat the source of such perceptions. Of course, the nonrational animal’s perceptions are not informed by intellect, but they *are* informed by that animal’s aim, the for-the-sake-of-which of the activity of hunting and eating the animal.³⁵ Thus,

in *De anima* Aristotle identifies the activity of perceiving with the activity of feeling pleasure and pain, and the part that perceives and feels pleasure and pain with the part that flees and desires (III.7 431a8–14).

Insofar as the human's aim, the that-for-the-sake-of-which of action, is identified by intellect in the form of *phronēsis*, it is intellect that informs perception. Insofar as *phronēsis* is a kind of perception itself, we may understand it to be such intellectually informed perception of ethical particulars, that is, of particulars in their relevance to ethical action. So, just as the hound, upon encountering the scent of the hare, perceives it as a prompt to hunt because of its aim of self-preservation, so too a virtuous person, upon encountering, say, a person in distress, will perceive this as a prompt to virtuous activity because of her aim of acting virtuously. Or, in other circumstances, for example, our virtuous person is running into a burning building to save someone, seeing the person on the sidewalk outside who is in distress will not weigh upon the virtuous person as an occasion for virtue in the same way. Notice, however, that the identification of the specific for-the-sake-of-which of action is not other than perceiving the particular in a certain way, that is, *as* the prompt to a specific action. Having the right aim and perceiving the particulars *as* relevant to that aim are not two different states of mind (although they may be different in account, as Aristotle would say): the perception of the particulars *just is* the supposition of the aim as realized or specified in some circumstance.

It may seem that identifying *phronēsis* with a kind of perception is unnecessarily opaque. Why call *phronēsis* a kind of *perception* of particulars, rather than, say, a judgment *about* particulars? Why say, as the analogy suggests, that one *perceives* a particular as an occasion to enact a virtue, rather than that one *judges* thus? Why say that intellect operates *within* perception (by informing it) rather than say that intellect operates on the (neutral) material provided by perception? It is worth noting that, insofar as this question tracks the fact-value distinction—perception offers the fact, intellect judges the value—the question must be taken with a grain of salt. As Joseph Owens (1991) has argued, the fact-value distinction does not fit easily with Aristotle's moral and epistemological views. Based on Aristotle's principle that "the origin of all human cognition is located in sensible things,"³⁶ Owens argues that "known first of all in particular instances by anyone who has been brought up in the proper moral habituation, the aspect of the *kalon* is universalized by the mind just as is any other aspect commonly in the plurality of things."³⁷ In other words, what is good is *already* cognized in the particular before one comes to have an *idea* of goodness with which to judge the particular. This allows Aristotle to say in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.11 that "one ought to pay

attention to the undemonstrated assertions and opinions of experienced and older people, or of the *phronimos*, no less than to demonstrations, for because they have an eye derived from experience, they see correctly” (1143b11–14).

In keeping with the ability of those who have experience but not knowledge of the good to apprehend the particular good, the answer to why one would claim that *phronēsis* is a *perception* may be that Aristotle wants to maintain a degree of continuity between animal behavior and human behavior, and to speak of *phronēsis* as a kind of intellectual perception permits that continuity. In VI.7, Aristotle emphasizes the mundane nature of the human good, our likeness more to beasts than to gods. Unlike *sophia*, which is concerned with the highest things, *phronēsis* is concerned merely with the *human* good. “All would say that what is wise is the same thing but that what is *phronimos* differs: they would assert that that which observes the good condition for each sort of thing is *phronimos*, and they would entrust such concerns to this. Hence they assert that certain beasts too are *phronimos*, namely, all those that manifestly have the capacity for forethought concerning their own life” (*Nic. Eth.* 1141a24–28). If animals have something like *phronēsis* without having intellect or judgment, *phronēsis* ought to be, at least in part, a perceptual operation.

Another part of the answer rests in Aristotle’s position that perception is inherently evaluative, as Moss has persuasively shown (2012). As I will discuss in more detail below, the objects of perception are perceived as pleasant or painful, which is to say that they are perceived as good for or bad for the perceiving animal. Moreover, this perceiving an object as good (pleasant) or bad (painful) motivates the animal’s action with respect to it: “to feel pleasure or pain is to be active with the perceptive mean towards the good or bad as such. Avoidance and desire, as actual, are the same thing, and that which can desire and that which can avoid are not different either from each other or from what can perceive” (*De anima* 431a10–14). Perception is itself evaluative, and since the objects of perception are present particulars, this is what perception evaluates.

That the nature of perception in nonrational animals is evaluative already suggests that in the case of rational animals, too, perception will do at least some work of evaluating particulars as good or bad. We can see further that it is necessary that intellect operate *through* perception rather than make judgments *about* it if we consider another feature of perception: in addition to being evaluative, perception must also be selective. Aristotle does not make this feature explicit, but it is too obvious a fact of experience that *not* all objects of perception are perceived pleasantly or painfully—many are not even noticed, or are noticed as irrelevant to the perceiver—for Aristotle

(great observer that he is) to deny. Moreover, this feature is implicit in the evaluative nature of perception: if an animal perceives something as pleasant, it will pursue it; in order to pursue it, the animal cannot be distracted by the myriad of other perceptible objects. So, for example, our lion that smells that cow (*Nic. Eth.* 1118a18–23) and begins hunting it will not notice, that is, perceive pleasantly or painfully, the grass at his feet. The principle of perception's selectivity is supplied by the animal's aims, the general aim of self-preservation as specified in this particular situation in which there is a cow to hunt.

If the relationship between perception and intellect were such that intellect proffered judgments upon the neutral information provided by perception, it would be necessary that perception be indifferently attentive. What I mean is that, if *intellect* alone decides what is good or bad, what is an occasion for action, then perception would have to impartially present to intellect *all* the particulars of one's situation. In our example of the person in distress outside of a burning building, perception would not only present these aspects of the situation as equally worthy of noticing, but also the heat on one's skin from the fire, the hunger in one's belly, the way one's clothing feels, that there are many people watching the fire, and so on; if perception were not selective, intellect would decide on the comparative importance of *all* perceived data. This not only seems implausible based on experience—it does not seem that one makes judgments about what is worthy of attention from among a myriad of perceptual objects—but it also supposes that perception offers a kind of view from nowhere, as if the perceiving animal (rational or nonrational) were not already invested in pursuing goals that dictate which particulars are relevant. This contradicts the limited and particular nature of perception—in fact, it makes perception more like intellect, which is impartially receptive of all things.

To call *phronēsis* intellectual perception is to recognize that the aims that one adopts influence the way that things *appear* to one. This is something that Aristotle emphasizes with respect to habit and character in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The manner in which one habitually faces fear, for example, will alter the way fearful things *appear* to one, either as occasion to flee or occasion to stand one's ground. This is why it is only the virtuous person to whom the practical good appears (III.4 1113a22–31).

In sum, then, *phronēsis* is an intellectual virtue concerned with particulars, that is, objects of perception. It is nonetheless an *intellectual* virtue because perception of particulars is *informed* by the rational agent's projects and aims, of which *phronēsis* is a true supposition (see *Nic. Eth.* 1142b32–33). More accurately, *phronēsis* is the identification of the aim of action called for by the particulars of the situation.

The Mean of Perception

So far, I have argued that *phronēsis* is the capacity to correctly apprehend ethical particulars with respect to which one acts, and such an apprehension is accomplished by intellectually informed perception. But this requires some clarification: in what manner does intellect inform perception? Also, our original question remains: in what sense is *phronēsis* thus understood the *orthos logos* of virtue? These two questions will be put to rest by the same answer: I will argue that intellect informs perception by adjusting the perceptual mean that determines pleasure and pain, transforming it into an *ethical* mean. A distinctive mark of Aristotle's virtuous person is that she feels pleasure and pain at the right things—she takes pleasure in doing courageous acts (or at least is not pained by it) (*Nic. Eth.* 1104b3–8). Insofar as pleasure and pain are active states of the perceptual mean (*De anima* 431a10–11), this suggests that in the virtuous person the perceptual mean is altered so as to discern not only which perceptual qualities are pleasant and painful but which scenarios call for virtuous acts—the perceptual mean becomes an ethical mean. The ethical mean will provide an answer to the question of how intellect informs perception. It will also provide the sense in which *phronēsis* is the *orthos logos* of virtue: the perceptual mean is itself a *logos*, and the *ethical* mean will similarly be the *right logos*.

The person of genuine virtue is one who is appropriately sensitive, one who responds to her circumstances emotionally and actively in the right manner, at the right time, with respect to the right person, and so on. This receptive discernment, I will argue, is accounted for if we understand *phronēsis* as intellectually informed perception. To be receptively discerning requires that one be determinately open: on the one hand, one must be capable of appreciating unpredictable elements that are significant to one's situation, or, in Nussbaum's words, be capable of being surprised.³⁸ On the other hand, one must be able to distinguish between what is and what is not relevant or significant. In order to be receptively discerning, one must have a basic measure by which one can discern the relevance of things—this is the determinateness—but a measure that does not predict in advance what will and will not be significant—this is the openness. Perception by itself is receptively discerning insofar as it is defined by a perceptual mean, and insofar as *phronēsis* is a kind of perception, I suggest that *phronēsis* is the *orthos logos* of the *ethical* mean by providing to perception the terms within which to receive ethical particulars.

Aristotle's general account of perception in *De anima* II.5 introduces the determinacy of perception in a basic way: perception is a developed potentiality, analogous to the potential knower who has already learned, say,

mathematics, but is not actively using that knowledge (417b16–19). Perception is not an undifferentiated potential, as the child's potential to be a knower is undifferentiated, but an already determinate potential for specific modes of perception—vision, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, perceiving common and incidental perceptibles. That perception has this structure of having five senses determines what sorts of things are to be perceived—colors, sounds, tangible qualities like hot and cold, tastes, odors, sons of Diareos and Cleon—but not which *specific* things are to be perceived. In this sense, perception is determinately open.

There is, however, a more sophisticated sense in which perception is determinately open: perception is a mean (*mesotēs*), both with respect to each of the five senses (*De anima* 424a4–7), and with respect to the unity of perceptual experience (431a20). With respect to each of the five senses, Aristotle introduces the mean to explain how the sense discriminates its object and the sense in which it receives its form. Ultimately, the perceptual mean of each sense and of perception as a whole is invoked to explain the awareness included in perception. Aristotle first introduces the idea that perception is a mean at the conclusion of his analysis of the sense of touch:

Their sense-organ, that of touch, in which the sense called touch primarily resides, is the part which is potentially such as they are. For perceiving is a form of being affected; hence, that which acts makes that part, which is potentially as it is, such as it is itself actually. For this reason we do not perceive anything which is equally as hot or cold, or hard or soft, but rather excesses of these, the sense being a sort of mean [*mesotēs*] between the opposites present in objects of perception. And that is why it discriminates [*krinein*] objects of perception. For the mean is capable of discriminating; for it becomes to each extreme in turn the other extreme. And just as that which is to perceive white and black must be neither of them actually, although both potentially (and similarly too for the other senses), so in the case of touch that which is to perceive such must be neither hot nor cold. (*De anima* 423b30–424a10)

This passage tells us that the structure of sense as a mean explains the capacity of the sense to be acted upon and receive the sensible qualities. In order to be receptive to sensible qualities, the sense itself must not actively be any particular quality already, but potentially any one of them; in order to be potentially but not actively any one of a particular set of qualities (defined by the opposites relevant to each sense, e.g., hot and cold with respect to touch),

the sense must be a mean, a balanced ratio between the two opposites that can become weighted in one direction or another by the object at work on the sense. The mean is a determinate structure, a *logos*, that enables the sense to receive a specified range of qualities (*De anima* 424a25–28). Perception is not merely a blank slate, receptive of anything that happens to come its way; rather, it is receptive in particular ways of particular things. In order for the sense to be so discerningly receptive, it must have its own determinacy, its own particular structure that governs how it is receptive.³⁹ This is, of course, completely understandable: perception is a mode of engagement with the physical world, and any such engagement must be determinate.⁴⁰

Moreover, it is by virtue of being a mean that the sense discriminates (*krinein*), that is, includes an awareness of, its objects. Shortly after the introduction of the mean, Aristotle remarks: “It is also clear why plants do not perceive, although they have a part of soul and are affected by tangible objects; for they are cooled and warmed. The reason is that they do not have a mean, nor a first principle of a kind such as to receive the forms of objects of perception; rather they are affected by the matter as well” (*De anima* 424a32–b3). Because plants do not have a mean, the way they are affected by sensible objects is to simply take on those qualities, rather than to become aware of them. What plants lack is a structure that maintains a distinction between the plant itself and what it is being affected by; the mean supplies this structure. This implies that, in discerning the perceptible object, the sense maintains its mean state while it is moved from it in receiving the sensible quality: the sense becomes *aware* of heat because it remembers, so to speak, its natural state of balance. The perceptual mean is a persistent state that enables receptivity and discernment of its object, both with respect to each of the five senses and with respect to perception as a whole.

Finally, the mean of perception, by governing the range of items to which a sense is receptive, determines whether an item will be pleasant or painful. In *De anima* III.7, Aristotle notes that perception discerns what is pleasant and what is painful: “to feel pleasure or pain is to be active with the perceptual mean towards the good or bad as such” (431a10–11). Aristotle has already argued that the mean of perception governs a range of things of which it is receptive (425a25–28), explaining that this is the reason why a sense is destroyed by an excessively strong object: “for if the movement is too violent for the sense-organ, its *logos* is destroyed—and this we saw the sense to be—just as the consonance and pitch of the strings are destroyed when they are struck too violently” (424a30–32). He later adds that this range also determines whether something will be pleasant or painful: painful if the object falls at the extreme of the range, pleasant if it falls near the

middle (426a27–b7). Being pleased or being pained, then, arises just with the perception of pleasant or painful objects, that is, of objects that fall within or without the range governed by the mean of perception. The mean of perception, then, is a persistent state that enables receptivity and discernment both of the perceptual object and at the same time of the goodness or badness of that object (where perceptual goodness or badness, in nonrational animals, is the pleasure or pain caused by a perceptual object).

The Ethical Mean

For nonrational animals, determinations of pleasure and pain are sufficient determinations of what is good (beneficial) and what is bad (harmful), for the reason that nonrational animals seek only the preservation of their own life and the continuation of their species. Rational animals, however, seek not only the preservation of life, but also the achievement of a *good* life. If, then, the good life differs from the pleasant life, there will be a distinction to be drawn between what is pleasant and what is good. And indeed, the good life is distinct from the life of pleasure (a life, Aristotle remarks, suited to beasts [*Nic. Eth.* 1095b19–22]), and the good is distinct from the pleasant (II.4 1113a25–b2).⁴¹ What is pleasant *appears* good, but it may or may not be truly good. This distinction is especially evident in the phenomena of *akrasia* and *enkrateia*: what appears pleasant to such people are things they *think* are bad. This distinction between what is pleasant and what is good is a distinction that is unique to rational animals. This suggests, and the cases of the akratic and enkratic confirm, that the power that discerns what is truly good, rather than apparently good, is an intellectual power. The (undeveloped) mean of perception, for humans, is not sufficient to determine what is good or in what the good life consists; intellectual operation is required.

However, despite distinguishing what is truly good from what is pleasant, Aristotle insists that pleasure and pain are of the highest concern to virtue (*Nic. Eth.* 1104b8–9, 1105a4–7), “for taking delight and feeling pain make no small contribution to our actions’ being well or badly done” (1105a6–7). In II.3, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of feeling pleasure and pain at the appropriate things, for “it is on account of the pleasure involved that we do base things, and it is on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones” (1104b9–11). Moreover, “pleasure has been a part of the upbringing of us all from infancy; it is difficult to remove this experience, since our life has been so ingrained with it” (1105a1–3), and as a result it is necessary to be well brought up with respect to pleasure and pain (1104b11–12), habituated to feel pleasure and pain in the appropriate things.⁴² Further, Aristotle makes the case that “the pleasure and pain that accompanies someone’s deeds ought

to be taken as a sign of his characteristics: he who abstains from bodily pleasures and enjoys this very abstention is moderate, but he who is vexed in doing so is licentious” (1104b3–7). Evidently, Aristotle recognizes that what a person finds pleasant or painful is variable, subject to habituation,⁴³ and in accordance with one’s character—one’s virtue or lack thereof.

The mean of perception determines whether some object is perceived as pleasant or painful, and on this basis nonrational animals perceive what is good or bad. Rational animals, however, can and do distinguish what is pleasant or painful from what is good or bad (see *Nic. Eth.* I.4 1095a20–28, II.4 1113a25–b2). The phenomena of *akrasia* and *enkrateia* make this distinction especially obvious: such people take pleasure in something despite thinking that thing is bad. The virtuous person, by contrast, takes pleasure in things that are truly good, and only in these. Pleasure and pain, it seems, follow upon the goodness or badness of the object, not vice versa. Pleasure and pain, in general, are relative to the subject’s state (for example, what is pleasant or painful differs according to whether one is healthy or ill) and signify the apparent good.⁴⁴ The virtuous person is in such a state and has a character such that the pleasant and painful match up with good—the apparent good and the truly good align. This is why the virtuous person is a “rule and measure” (1113a33).

We have, then, a distinction between what is pleasant and what is good, yet what is pleasant at least *appears* to be good (even if it is not, in fact, good). This distinction suggests that, in nonvirtuous rational animals, (a) there is a principle in addition to the (undeveloped) mean of perception by which the good and the bad are discerned, and (b) that in virtuous people these two principles are aligned. The principle that distinguishes the good from the bad is an intellectual principle, as indicated by the akratic and enkratic people who *think* what is good while taking pleasure in something else. In the virtuous person, then, the perceptual mean and some sort of intellectual principle are in harmony. As we saw, pleasure and pain are subject to habituation: what one takes pleasure in and the manner in which one does so are the results of education in upbringing.

There is a significant difference between the way a nonvirtuous person experiences pleasure and pain and the way a virtuous person does. In III.4, Aristotle addresses the question of whether the object of wish (*boulēsis*) is the good or (merely) the apparent good (*Nic. Eth.* 1113a15–22). The reason the question arises is because “different things appear good to different people, and, should it so happen, even contrary things” (1113a21–22). As a result, either the merely apparent good is the object of wish and there is “no object of wish by nature” (1113a21), or what is truly good is the object of wish, and

those wish for the merely apparent good do not in fact wish for the true object of wish (1113a17–18). Aristotle resolves this problem by allowing that the object of wish is what appears to be good, but that what appears to be good is truly good for one in a good condition, that is, to a serious or virtuous person, and to a base person what appears good *merely* appears to be good (1113a22–29). He concludes:

For the serious person judges [*krinein*] each case correctly, and in each case what is true appears to him. For with respect to each characteristic, there are noble and pleasant things peculiar to it; and the serious person is distinguished perhaps most of all by his seeing [*horāin*] what is true in each case, just as if he were a rule and measure of them. But in the case of most people, a deception [*apatē*] appears to occur on account of the pleasure involved, for what is not good appears to them as good. They choose the pleasant, then, on the grounds that it is good, and they avoid pain on the grounds that it is bad. (*Nic. Eth.* 1113a29–b2)

For the nonvirtuous person, pleasure and pain are *deceptive*. The deception that the nonvirtuous person suffers on account of pleasure, in a straightforward way, is to be deceived in thinking something good that is not good. But there is also a structural way in which pleasure is deceptive to the nonvirtuous: the nonvirtuous person wrongly identifies the goodness or badness of something with the pleasure or pain she takes in it. Even if she happens to take pleasure in something truly good, she thinks it good *because* of the pleasure involved.⁴⁵ The virtuous person, by contrast, correctly sees what is truly good, and takes pleasure in it on that basis. In the discussion of *apatē* in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6, Aristotle argues that “what appears to a serious person seems to be the case in fact; and if this is nobly stated, as indeed it seems to be, and [if] virtue and the good human being, insofar as he is good, are the measure of each thing, then the pleasures that appear to him would be pleasures in fact, and the pleasant things would be those in which he delights” (1176a15–19). Thus, whereas pleasure is deceptive for the nonvirtuous, it is a true appearance of the good for the virtuous.

For the true and apparent good to coincide, the virtuous person must take pleasure in what she determines by intellectual exercise is good. But intellectual exercise does not by itself alter the appearance of the good. In order for the *appearance* of the good to change, the mean that determines what is pleasant and what is painful must itself be altered: the explicit idea of the good must come to inform the perceptual mean, transforming it into an ethical

mean. The ethical mean of perception would be a steady state that enables the discernment and receptivity of perceptual objects *as* good or bad, and *as* occasions for virtuous action (and passion). What I mean is this: *phronēsis* provides the terms of apprehension of the ethical particular, just as the mean of vision provides the terms black-white that define the range within which visual objects are perceived. The supposition of the for-the-sake-of-which of action that *phronēsis* provides sets the terms for the reception of particulars by attuning the virtuous agent in particular ways, just as the cardiologist is attuned to certain symptoms of heart disease. The *phronimos*, similarly, has a set of terms that attune her to occasions for virtue, and this informs her perception of such particulars.

Let us mine the idea of the mean of perception: the terms that define the mean (e.g., black/white) are established by the prior work of the parents; like the soul itself, perception is a natural first actuality. As a result, black and white are pre-empirical terms *of* experience: experience of color is made possible by these terms and others like them. Ethical experience is not preprogrammed in the way perception is preprogrammed because of the distinction between pleasure and the good.⁴⁶ Instead, ethical experience must be worked up and developed. Once developed, however, the terms that condition ethical experience take on the role of pre-empirical terms, like black and white. For example, a child must learn to concern herself with others; she must learn to share, for example, or to ask about the well being of others. Once learned, however, the child's experience is colored by a general concern for others. Having concern for others is no longer an option; it becomes a term of experience of others. However, being concerned for the well-being of others *in general* will only accomplish natural virtue—such a person may free a dangerous criminal out of such concern. In order to be *phronimos*, a person will have to have the terms of concern for others in the right balance; *phronēsis* harnesses such terms into a mean. Just as the mean of perception discriminates what is, for example, hot from what is *too* hot, so too the *phronimos* will discriminate what is concern for others from what is *too* concerned for others (or deficient concern for others).

Recall that *phronēsis* is an intellectual perception of particulars as occasions for virtue. This kind of perception, I argued above, is perception informed by the agent's virtuous aims. Now that we have seen the connection between pleasure as the appearance of the good and what is truly good for the virtuous person, we should understand *phronēsis* as the ethical mean responsible for the unity of the appearance and the reality of what is good. And if it is a mean, it is an *orthos logos* that enables the receptivity of particulars in their goodness (or badness).

4. *Phronēsis* and Deliberation

Phronēsis is sometimes taken to be the process of practical thinking, or to be equivalent to good deliberation. Aristotle does, indeed, articulate an intimate connection between deliberation and *phronēsis*: he begins his inquiry into *phronēsis* through its connection to deliberation (“As for what concerns *phronēsis*, we might grasp it by contemplating whom we say to be *phronimos*. It seems to belong to the *phronimos* to be able to deliberate nobly about things good and advantageous for himself” [*Nic. Eth.* 1140a24–27]), and he repeats the sentiment later, that the *phronimos* will be one who deliberates well (1141b9–10). Similarly, he concludes the chapter devoted to deliberation by saying, “So if having deliberated well belongs to those who are *phronimos*, good deliberation would be a correctness that accords with what is advantageous in relation to the end, about which end *phronēsis* is a true conviction” (1142b31–33). Rather than identify *phronēsis* and good deliberation, however, Aristotle speaks of good deliberation as what *phronēsis* makes possible. The person with *phronēsis* will deliberate well, and in general one who deliberates well will also be *phronimos* (1140a30–31); good deliberation is in accord with the end that *phronēsis* identifies.

In the discussion of deliberation in *Nicomachean Ethics* III.3, Aristotle sets limits to what may be deliberated about: we deliberate only about things that are up to us and subject to action (1112a30–31), we do not deliberate about ends (*telos*) but only about things toward the end (1112b11–12), and we do not deliberate about particulars, such as “whether this is a loaf of bread or whether it has been baked as it ought to have been—for these belong to perception” (1112b34–1113a1). In VI, we see *phronēsis* identified with both these limits of deliberation: *phronēsis* is the true supposition of the end with respect to which one deliberates (1142b31–33), and it is of those particulars of which there is no *logos* but only a perception (1142a23–30). If we understand *phronēsis* as the ethical mean of perception, we can accommodate both of these characterizations, and see how *phronēsis* contributes to good deliberation. The ethical mean of perception provides the terms within which particulars are perceived in their relevance to ethical choice and action, and such relevance is, in turn, determined by the aims and projects of the agent. If *phronēsis* is such a power to apprehend ethical particulars, it is both a supposition about the end or aim of action, for example, staving off one’s hunger, and a perception of particulars such as this bread that is baked well. The *phronimos* may nevertheless have to deliberate about how to go about procuring the bread (buying it or baking a similar loaf), but the limits between which she deliberates will already be provided. For a more obviously

virtue-related example, we might think of the generous person. She will have the aim of acting generously, and this enables her to perceive the destitute person as an occasion for enacting virtue. It is by virtue of having the aim (of which *phronēsis* is the true supposition) that she perceives the particular (this person here) in the way that she does. She may still deliberate about how best to be generous to this person, but the limits between which she deliberates will be set by *phronēsis*. As I claimed above, the supposition of the limit and the perception of the particulars relevant to it are not two separate states: the perception of the particulars *just is* the supposition of the aim as realized in some circumstance. And so the *phronimos* will in general also be a good deliberator because she is right with respect to the defining terms about which one deliberates.

5. *Phronēsis* and Virtue

There is one final issue to be addressed before closing. Twice at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics* VI Aristotle seems to say that *phronēsis* is concerned only with the things toward the end or aim of action, and virtue of character secures that end. (a) In VI.12, in the context of developing the question of whether *phronēsis* is useful for action, Aristotle notes, “It is possible for someone to perform each thing in turn while being in a certain state, with the result that he is good—I mean, that is, through choice and for the sake of the actions themselves. As for the choice involved, then, virtue makes it correct; but as for doing all that is naturally done for the sake of that choice, this belongs not to virtue but to another capacity” (1144a18–22). At the conclusion of VI.13, he says, “It is clear too there will be no correct choice in the absence of *phronēsis*, nor in the absence of virtue; for the latter makes one carry out the end, the former the things conducive to the end” (1145a4–6).⁴⁷ If we understand virtue to attune one *generally* in a virtuous way—to enable one to *be* concerned with the well-being of others—and *phronēsis* to be the *specific* attunement to particulars in light of such a general attunement, these comments mean that virtue sets the broad aim, and *phronēsis* specifies that aim in its receptivity to the particular.

Recall that in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.5 Aristotle remarks that pleasure and pain may *corrupt* the supposition of the principle of action, that is, what the aim is that *phronēsis* grasps. This corruption, I suggest, may occur in two complementary ways: pleasure may corrupt the supposition of the principle of action simply by deceiving the agent about what is good, or pleasure may corrupt the conviction of the principle of action by focusing too much of the agent’s attention on one feature of a practical situation. In X.5, Aristotle

notices that pleasures are closely bound up with particular activities, such that “those who engage in an activity with pleasure judge [*krinein*] each particular better and are more precise about it” (1175a31–32). Furthermore, Aristotle continues, “given activities are impeded by the pleasures arising from other activities: those who love the aulos are incapable of paying attention to speeches if they overhear someone playing the aulos, because they take greater delight in the art of playing the aulos than they do in the activity before them. The pleasure derived from the art of aulos playing, then, spoils the activity concerned with speech” (1175b2–6). If it is the mark of the *phronimos* to identify correctly the particular aim of action, it is necessary that the *phronimos* be innocent of both these kinds of corruption: what she takes pleasure in must correspond to what is truly good, and she must not take too much pleasure in any one thing, which would blind her to other important elements by which to determine a good action. So, for example, a person with *phronēsis* should not take too much pleasure in listening to the aulos, which would blind her to the elements of her situation that would engage her generosity. Moderation moderates the pleasures so that the agent is neither deceived by them nor too taken by particular pleasures.

Conclusion

The problem that the akratic faces is that her perceptual experience is governed by a principle that differs from the principle that she explicitly adopts intellectually. So, for example, an akratic may reasonably hold that one ought to treat other people with respect, but nevertheless angrily uses violence upon a friend because her perception is informed only by a principle of pleasure and pain. As I argued in the previous chapter, this means that the akratic perceives her friend only as a source of pain, which is to say that she is perceived as a merely present particular, not in the larger context of the good life or even in the context of their friendship as an ongoing relationship. This requires some intellectual input to transform mere perception into understanding perception.

This problem is compounded by another, which has been the focus of this chapter, namely, that one must be sensitive to the particulars of the situation such that one can discern when and how one’s aim to act virtuously is to conform to the particular circumstance in which one acts. If one operates too intellectually, so to speak, operating on the basis of an explicit rule, one will not have the resources to discern when what usually ought to be done should not be done here and now. For example, if one holds that respecting other people amounts to telling the truth, but one is not sensitive to the

specificities with respect to which one acts, one will not be able to discern that respect is better accomplished by lying or keeping silent in this case.

Both of these problems point to the necessity of perceiving well, where perceiving well means not being beholden to the pleasures and pains of the mere present and also not being blinded by one's own adherence to principles. Perceiving well means being receptive of particulars as they truly are, not merely as sources of pleasure or pain and not merely as one judges them to be by subsuming them under universal categories. But these two problems also seem to require opposing things of perception and intellect—intellect must enrich perceptual experience without rigidly determining it. Intellect must resituate perception while maintaining perception's sensitivity to the particular. If the understanding of *phronēsis* offered here is right, we can accommodate both requirements of perceiving well. Learning, reflection, and thought open up perceptual possibilities, analogous to the way that learning to walk opens up the possibility of running and dancing without dictating which dances and runs one will undertake. Similarly, developing a friendship with a person enables one to see things about that person that she may not even see herself. Learning about the kinds of behaviors that elicit and manifest generosity opens up the possibility of recognizing new expressions of generosity. But the way that learning opens up new ways of seeing is not by introducing new categories—adhering too strictly to these categories can cause a person to be blind to new particulars—but rather by structuring the perceptual mean with new terms of receptivity, in the way that “white” and “black” structure our receptivity to color.

Aristotle insists that the aim of virtuous action is only apparent to the fully virtuous person. As we have seen, the aim is a particular in the sense of being internal to the particular action undertaken. Furthermore, this particular aim cannot simply be decided upon in advance, but must instead be sensitive to the unpredictable reality of the present situation of action. To have the virtuous aim be apparent to one, then, means that one must be maximally receptive to ethically relevant features of the situation of action. In other words, one must be able to see broadly—not to be confined to one's categories of understanding—and to see deeply—to be able to comprehend the significance of something that is not subsumed under one's categories of understanding.

Neoptolemus sees in this broad and deep way. Were he like Emma Woodhouse, the thesis that Odysseus persuaded him to adopt (namely, that Philoctetes was a cursed and vile man) would have prevented him from seeing Philoctetes's suffering as an occasion for the virtues of friendship and honesty. Instead, Neoptolemus's good character enables him to see

Philoctetes's suffering in its relevance to virtuous action. Being prepared to see one thing did not prevent Neoptolemus from seeing what was actually in front of him, and it was this sight that caused him to alter his chosen course of action. To be able to decide whether one's reasoning applies to one's current circumstances is the mark of the *phronimos*, and it is accomplished by the virtue of intellectual perception.

