

Practical Truth

A stone can't lie in ambush waiting to trip you up. A cracking branch of a tree doesn't aim at the cups and glasses it breaks in falling. A monkey can't open a bank account. A cow can't pay debts.

Now, there is a special kind of multiplicity of levels of description of human acts of which I want to speak. I put ink on paper in the form of letters. I'm writing something. I am in fact signing something with my name. And I'm thereby joining in a petition to the governor of the state — or prison — where I am an inhabitant. I am taking part in a campaign to get people tortured under interrogation. In doing this I am keeping a promise. I am avoiding trouble with some conspirators who have got me to promise to do that.

What I'm now wanting to remind you of is just this kind of different levels of description. I don't mean every list of different things that might suitably be called 'different levels'. *That* might apply to the branch of the tree falling. It breaks the glasses it falls on. It infuriates the owner of the glasses. It makes him behave crossly to the people he is with. So it causes him to lose a contract he was hoping to make. This is a sequence of effects, each effect a cause of the next one. Like in the lines:

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For want of a nail, a shoe was lost.

For want of the shoe, the horse was lost.

For want of the horse, the rider was lost.

For want of the rider, a message was lost.

For want of the message, a battle was lost.

And all for the want of a horse-shoe nail.

But the kind of different levels of description of a human action that I want to attend to here takes as examples descriptions of the same act under which the agent is *responsible* (guilty or praiseworthy). In many cases all the descriptions are descriptions under which the action is intentional. In these cases, the series of descriptions is connected with a special sort of developing series of true answers to the question 'What for?' You were writing your name on a piece of paper — what for? The answer is 'I was signing a contract of sale of a car'. What for? 'So as not to own the car, so as to be able to avoid its being taken from me by bailiffs to contribute to a fine I don't want to pay — that is, to avoid paying a fine.' What for? 'Oh, because I regard the fine as unjust and am therefore unwilling to pay it, and I don't want property taken from me to meet it.' Why won't you give up your property to pay a fine you think unjust? 'Simply because I think it unjust and I can reasonably avoid loss of property in this way.'

This sort of series showing one's intentions in respect of a series of descriptions of some one action is not indeed the only type of example where the agent is responsible. For a true answer to 'Why did you do this?' might be 'I didn't notice such-and-such features of the situation'. But such an answer raises complicated issues which I don't want to cover here, so I will stick to the type I have exemplified in some detail, where the action-descriptions form a related series and were shown by the true answers to the questions as being descriptions under which the action was intentional.

My purpose in discussing such cases is to explain the notion of practical truth.

So far as I know, Aristotle was the first to formulate this concept. The place to find it formulated is the second chapter of Book VI of the *Ethica Nicomachea*, within the numbers 1139a–b. Aristotle tells us that as positive and negative predication are in thought, so are pursuit of and flight from in desire. This comparison is rendered pretty clear if we remember that predicating something, *S*, of some object *O* is equivalent to rejecting a contrary negation of *S* in respect of the same object. Comparably, going after something can be equated with the willful rejection of *not* having it. To speak in terms of propositions, we note the equivalence of *p* and *not-not-p*, and see it paralleled by an equivalence of ‘Yes’ to possible health and ‘No’ to prospective sickness.

We note that Aristotle is not comparing *attraction* and contrary affects of the psychic faculty of desire to affirmation and negation: no, he compares pursuit and flight, which are possible *actions*, to positive predication and negation. That is to say, he *considers* desire (ὄρεξις) and in connection with it he identifies actions of pursuit and flight as saying ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, one to what is sought, the other to what is fled. This, I take it, is because avoidance of avoidance is equivalent to seeking-to-have. The comparison with positive and negative judgmental¹ predication is of course made *à propos* reactions of human beings who have language and are well advanced in the use of it. This fits the fact that his topics are πρᾶξις and προαίρεσις, *action* and *decision*, in a sense in which neither can be attributed to children or beasts.

Aristotle is therefore writing about men, ἄνθρωποι, not counting children, and also excluding other animals. This is apparent from the rest of the passage. His next sentence begins ‘so that’,

[1] I think we have to take Aristotle’s positive and negative predication as signifying *assertive* predication; otherwise the comparison of pursuit and avoidance with it would not be apt.

which shows that he is drawing a conclusion from the comparison he has made.

'So that, since moral virtue, i.e., virtue in actions and passions, is a disposition of decision making, and decision is deliberative will, this means that for decision to be sound the reasons must be *true*, the will *right*, and the same things must be named by the one and pursued by the other.' This is implied by the parallel he has pointed to between thought and will (ὄρεξις) given his account of decision, which involves both thought and will.

Thus, by identification of their roles in will with those of positive and negative predication in thought, the sort of 'Yes' and 'No' involved in decisions is claimed to be specifically human and not generically animal. Aristotle draws his conclusion not only from that identification, but, given it, from the character of a virtue as a disposition of the faculty of decision.

He tells us that, for purely theoretical thinking the 'well and badly' are truth and falsehood. This is indeed what thinking does, well or badly, truly or falsely, and so these are the business (the ἔργον) of *any* thinking. But he has also said, in speaking of the conditions of 'sound' *decision*, that the thinking and truth *here* are '*practical* thought and truth'. Here we have the explicit formulation '*practical* truth'. And now he adds to the general characterization of any thinking at all, that the '*business*', the '*job*', of thinking that is practical is 'truth in agreement with right desire'. This does not exclude the possibility that practical thinking may be bad, and its badness partly lie in falsehood. Still, we *shall* want to know what falsehood is special to practical thinking. However, at this point of the text Aristotle is most concerned to say that there is no decision-making, no deciding without mind, thought, and *some* ethical disposition. This, he insists, applies also to '*poetic*', i.e. *productive*, thinking. For every producer or maker is producing for the sake of something, and the product itself is not his end *simpliciter*: that is, not his end. 'For doing well is the end, and the desire in decision is for that. So decision is

desiring thought or thinking desire – and *the* cause of this kind is man.’ Note the importance of this final sentence of the passage. There is this special kind of cause operating in the world, and it is man.

We need now to consider what Aristotle means by ‘truth in agreement with right desire’.

It is clear what ‘truth in agreement with desire’ would be. It would be: things being as a desirer wants them to be. Remember in Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam where he (Fitzgerald, at least) speaks of a longing ‘to break this sorry scheme of things entire’ and ‘remake it nearer to the heart’s desire’.

‘Truth in agreement with right desire’, then, will mean ‘things (i.e. whatever is in question to bring about in action) being as rightly desired’. We ask: ‘With *what* rightness?’ It must be rightness of the ‘right desire’ in the decision of the agent when that is sound. That decision, Aristotle has said, ought to be to pursue what true thinking names.

To understand this, we look further in our text and come to the desire being ultimately a desire of doing well (εὐπραξία). In Book VI, Aristotle writes as if this were always the last objective here and now of a human ‘action’. Therefore of the action of a wicked man no less than of a good one. At some level of characterization of his action, the wicked man’s will be false. The falsehood may be in an earlier identification – for example, helping your neighbours *is* doing well, but killing someone for them is not helping them. And the desire or will in choice will be for this end, doing well, whether the choice is that of the good or of the bad man.

At this point someone may say to me: ‘Either Aristotle is inconsistent here with what he says about decision in Book III or you have got him wrong. For in Book III he is quite clear that a decision, a choice, relates to means, not ends. But by your understanding of this passage in Book VI he thinks that the will in decision is a will for an end.’

The question is relevant, but the suspicion is wrong. Aristotle does indeed not think that choice is of ends. But he does think that the will or desire *in* choice is primarily of the end. We should not forget that the choice of means is choice of them *as* means. Therefore, though we may not choose what to make our ends, the decisions we make must *contain* willings of ends.

In modern philosophy of the Anglo-American tradition there is a great fault: I call it 'the monolithic conception of desire, or wanting, or will'. It is readily seen what you want by what you do. This is simplistic. It is, for example, *as* possible to want not to get something you want as it is to believe that not everything you believe is true. If so, there are different levels and kinds of wanting, and this the ancients, certainly Aristotle, did know. The wanting of the thing you choose is *in* your decision. But there is also wanting what you choose it *for*, and this wanting is in the decision too, even though it may be that you have never chosen, never decided, to *make* it your objective.

However, Aristotle does not write as if he needed to look only at sound practical thinking. He does not speak of a 'well or badly' of thinking in determining actions. It comes in implicitly a few lines on, when he speaks of the dependence of doing well *and* its opposite, on thought and moral character. I think he could not have launched into *discussion* of 'the opposite' without getting into questions too complicated for the balance of the passage — for example, the argument, which Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates in the *Meno*, that no man ever wills evil.

However this may be, there is something further that my imaginary opponent may say: 'There is a statement in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1367b) which can't be true to Aristotle: namely that it is a property of — i.e. is peculiar to — the sound man that what accords with his decision, το κατὰ προαίρεσιν, happens. But now: if Aristotle meant that, would he not have to think that the wicked man (the ἀκολαστος) was incapable of choosing, or at any rate of doing so effectually? Yet we know from numerous pas-

sages that Aristotle thinks that the wicked man does choose, does act, i.e. choosing and deciding he does what he does. Also, that if he's clever enough to bring about what he has chosen, then, lacking good counsel (εὐβουλίᾳ), 'he obtains for himself a great evil'.

That is all quite true and in fact it contains the solution to the problem felt when presented with that passage in the *Rhetoric*: the wicked man *does* choose, and acts badly if he is effective. But does 'things being according to his choice' characterize him? In a sense yes, if he's clever. He robs and seduces successfully, let us say. But 'things being according to his choice' is more than that. It is evidently part of Aristotle's understanding that everyone (once grown-up) acts, if he does act, choosing, i.e. deciding what to do, in the belief that in so acting he is doing well — doing well for himself.

Suppose a man does *not* act according to that conception — he is not wicked, only *weak-willed*. So he is bad, but not in his moral decisions, only in his failure to act according to them. This man perhaps has the right — i.e. true — conception of what doing well is; in action, however, he fails to pursue that objective. But the wicked man does act in the belief that, in his very action, he is doing well. It is at least in *this* that his thinking is false.

This enables us to understand why Aristotle said that if a choice is to be sound, not only must the thought be true, but the thinking must name and the desire pursue the same things. The 'names' in the relevant thoughts will finally and most importantly include 'doing well', but also names like 'getting wealth', 'avoiding taxation', 'making friends', or again 'paying bills', 'fighting a duel'. The 'names' must all be true of what is actually done and if they are not, then the agent's thoughts are not true, and his will may not be right.

Finally, we may note that we have given an explanation of 'practical truth'. This is truth that one produces in acting according to choice and decision.

There is often resistance to the idea that one can produce truth, i.e. make something true. But can it not be that one brings it about that p ? And are not p and the truth of p equivalent. I.e.

It is true that $p \equiv p$.

If, then, one can bring it about that p , then one can make it true that p . This, however, does not satisfy people who are outraged by the notion that one can make truth. Truth, they say, is always truth and unchangeable and cannot be *brought about*. Whatever is true always *was* so; we just make a change of tense. Suppose it is true that I am signing a contract now. Then 10,000 years ago it *was* true that I was going to be signing that contract now. Or, perhaps more correctly, the following proposition was true 10,000 years ago: 'Elizabeth Anscombe will sign such-and-such a contract in 10,000 years'. (Perhaps we don't want to be bothered by questions of dates and chronology — so we can say instead 'Any amount of time ago this was true: "Elizabeth Anscombe will sign such-and-such a contract that time ahead"'.) A consequence of this is *not* a pure logical determinism; it does not mean that my action is not free. It does *not* mean that when today comes I *have* to make it true that I sign that contract today. As if I *had* to 'make it true' all that long time ago that I would sign the contract today. After all, I wasn't there to do it, was I? There is here no proof that I don't make it true that p . If I make it true that p , and q follows from $p - q$ being, say, '10,000 years ago it was true that NN would make it true that p ', and I being NN , then when I make it true that p , I make it have been true 10,000 years ago that q . I make it so *now*.

I have been given an objection to this, that it is contrary to the distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge — for if one knows that one made it to have been true 10,000 years ago, that's theoretical knowledge, whereas knowing one is signing a contract is practical knowledge. But this is not a sound objection. We — and, according to St. Thomas, God too — can have theoretical knowledge of what our present practical knowledge is of.

Why then, it may be asked, the peculiarities of Aristotle's investigation? We already have the answer: practical truth is the truth *brought about* in sound deliberation leading to decision and action, and this *includes* the truth of the description 'doing well'. Then, *if* the decision is sound, what happens — the action — does accord with it as I have described — right up to the description 'doing well'.

Reverting to my opening, it may have seemed that I must attribute 'making true' to any cause. If a branch falls and breaks a tea-pot, the falling branch has made it true that the tea-pot is broken. If a dog bites my hand and it bleeds, the dog has made it true that my hand is bleeding. One might indeed say these things, but they would be trivial and pointless. Practical truth is truth created by action in a sense in which neither branches nor dogs nor children are capable of action. It might be called 'praxistic truth' in order to emphasise that it is truth brought about by a praxis resulting from deliberation — i.e. by an action (in fulfillment of a choice) which satisfies the description 'doing well'. That is a final description of what every praxis — every 'action' in this limited sense — aims at being. This makes clear what 'practical falsehood' would be. The agent chooses and he wants and believes the action that he chooses to be a *case* of doing well; and it is not. Plato's Socrates would say that his wanting to be doing well shows that he does *not* choose evil, but rather good, just because he wants to do well. But Plato's Socrates ought to admit that wanting to do what is in fact doing badly

- (a) does not amount to doing well just because one wants to be doing well, and
- (b) that it does not then even amount to *wanting to be doing well*.

He would admit (a) but deny (b). He would deny (b) because he would attribute the correctness of the description 'doing badly' to mere ignorance on the part of the agent, and would persuade his companions that such ignorance would not falsify the

description of the will in question as will for what is good – namely, doing well.

sample chapter