

**An intra-textual study of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI and the role of  
the five states of the rational soul**

by

**Arne Karl Leeftang**

**A mini-dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree:**

**MA: Ancient Languages and Cultures (Coursework),**

**Department of Ancient Languages,**

**Faculty of Humanities,**

**at the University of Pretoria.**

**Supervisor: Prof. GJ Swart**

**January 2011**

## Summary

An intra-textual study of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI and the role of the five states of the rational soul

by Arne Karl Leeflang

Supervisor: Prof. GJ Swart

Department of Ancient Languages

Submission of mini-dissertation for the degree MA: Ancient Languages and Cultures (Coursework)

In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle makes the assumption that there are five states of the soul through which we interact with truth. He continues Book VI with a discussion of **his** intended meaning of each of these states of the soul. In this study the relevant discussions on each state are extracted from the text to enable a clearer understanding of these states, as Aristotle presents them. Subsequently, the role of each state is studied in the context of the entire *Nicomachean Ethics*. The primary focus is directed at a clearer **understanding** of Aristotle's proposed intellectual virtues, and on their respective roles in the ethical life. Simultaneously, the ethical life that Aristotle presents, and its ultimate end *eudaimonia*, or happiness, are approached from this perspective.

Aristotle argues that reason is **the** distinguishing feature of humans, and that man's excellence must include the excellent use of this capacity. This study investigates how Aristotle proposes that the rational intellect should reach its completion, and comes to the conclusion that true mastery of the intellect can only result from the **cooperation** of the five states of the rational soul. It becomes evident that each state of the soul has a different nature and function, and that through directed cooperation they do not compete with one another, but are mutually enhanced.

However, Aristotle repeatedly emphasises the importance of extending thought into action. This makes Aristotle's ethical theory so attractive: he manages to consolidate his theorizing with the value of experienced reality. This is his essential key to happiness, which is experienced both in perception and in action.

By approaching the *Nicomachean Ethics* from the perspective of the five states of the rational soul, an appreciation is acquired for the fine balance by which action and reason may combine to result in man's fulfilment of his highest potential. It is in this balance that one finds the secret to *eudaimonia*.

[363 words]

**List of key terms:** Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, states, soul, intellectual, virtues, happiness, *eudaimonia*, wisdom, practical, philosophic, art, scientific, contemplation, intuitive, reason, perception.

## Contents

1.	Introduction.....	5
1.1.	Introduction.....	5
1.2.	Research Problem .....	6
1.3.	Research Approach .....	7
1.4.	Method .....	10
1.5.	Objectives of the study.....	10
1.6.	Expected Results .....	11
1.7.	Practical Notes .....	12
2.	Analysis of Part 1 of the statement .....	13
3.	‘Art’ ( <i>technē</i> ).....	17
3.1.	<i>Technē</i> in Book VI.....	17
3.2.	<i>Technē</i> in the <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .....	19
4.	‘Scientific Knowledge’ ( <i>epistēmē</i> ).....	27
4.1.	<i>Epistēmē</i> in Book VI.....	27
4.2.	<i>Epistēmē</i> in the <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .....	29
5.	‘Practical wisdom’ ( <i>phronēsis</i> ) .....	33
5.1.	<i>Phronēsis</i> in Book VI.....	33
5.2.	<i>Phronēsis</i> in the <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .....	39
6.	‘Philosophic wisdom’ ( <i>sophia</i> ).....	51
6.1.	<i>Sophia</i> in Book VI.....	51
6.2.	<i>Sophia</i> in the <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .....	58
7.	‘Intuitive reason’ ( <i>nous</i> ).....	68
7.1.	<i>Nous</i> in Book VI .....	68
7.2.	<i>Nous</i> in the <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> .....	72
8.	Discussion .....	78
8.1.	States of the soul vs. fields of knowledge.....	78
8.2.	The close connection between action and theory.....	80
8.3.	The cooperative nature of the five states of the soul.....	81
8.4.	<i>Eudaimonia</i> .....	83
9.	Formal Conclusion.....	86
10.	Bibliography.....	88

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle searches for the ultimate end, or goal, at which all man's efforts and actions are aimed. He reasons that every action aims at achieving some end. Usually, that end is merely a stepping stone which, in its turn, leads to another end. Aristotle assumes, if one were to find an end which would not be sought in order of achieving another, but which would be sought entirely for its own sake, that this would be the ultimate goal at which everything else aims, and that it would be advantageous to know what this final end is. As he says in chapter two of Book I in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?  
(1094a 22–25)

Aristotle comes to the conclusion that happiness is that goal, that final end. He is quick to point out, though, that this is not just a happy feeling, or a feeling of pleasure, but a state of living and acting, which is justified by one's highest ideals and principles, and is a demonstration of the best that man holds as potential within himself. He then proceeds to search for practical steps which may lead to such a life.

Aristotle comes to the conclusion that, in this regard, a fundamental role is played by an interaction of moral and intellectual virtues. The moral virtues, which Aristotle discusses in great detail, are in essence acquired by habit and executed by the adherence to the 'right rule'. He is soon confronted by the dilemma which this 'right rule' presents, because specific circumstances require an adaptation to their particular details in a way which cannot be put in a simple formula. Aristotle assumes that **intellectual** virtues are required to identify the 'right rule' in confrontation to specific circumstances.

Thus, a man leading such a 'happy' life, as Aristotle imagines it, will guide his actions with his moral virtues, and will guide his moral virtues with his intellectual virtues. In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle discusses these intellectual virtues, how he understands them, and how he intends them to be understood by his audience. Aristotle further distinguishes two parts within the 'intellectual soul', namely one which grasps the rational and one the irrational. It is that part which grasps the rational that Aristotle pursues, and distinguishes yet another two parts in this; one part by which one contemplates

variable, moving, or changing things, the other by which one contemplates invariable, fixed, or unchanging things.

Aristotle seems to assume the position that ‘like’ recognises ‘like’, and that ‘like’ parts in the soul will recognise ‘like’ parts outside of it as truth. In such a way, he assumes, one can recognise the ‘truth’ of a situation, and thus, recognise the ‘right rule’ which may guide one’s actions toward the best possible outcomes. At this stage Aristotle distinguishes five different ways<sup>1</sup> in which one engages with knowledge, to find truth in this sense, and thus also, the ‘right rule’.

In the following study these five ways of engaging with knowledge are analysed – in the direct context of Book VI of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and subsequently, in the broader context of the entire *Nicomachean Ethics*.

## 1.2. Research Problem

The specific statement which forms the focal point of this study comes from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI chapter three:

### 1139b:15-18

Let it be assumed that the states by virtue of which the soul possesses truth by way of affirmation or denial are five in number, i.e. art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, intuitive reason;

The English translation of the text is by W. D. Ross. J. L. Ackrill amended some parts of the text to improve its clarity (cf. Ackrill 1973: 35), but the specific text in question (1139b:15–18) remains unchanged.

The statement comes across as startling in its boldness, and is filled with potential problems. To some extent, these are due to difficulties with translation. This will be addressed more specifically under ‘Research Approach’. Aristotle himself seemed to realise the impertinence of this statement, and consequently explains in Book VI what he means by each ‘state of the soul’, and how this may ‘possess truth’. However, these ‘states’ are not the only problem in the statement. ‘Truth’ is a very loaded term, for instance, which needs to be contextualised and delimited. The ‘possession’ of which is equally in

---

<sup>1</sup> This describes it in a very broad sense. Attention will be given to the problems of translation, and in which way these may be approached. ‘Ways of engaging with knowledge’ deliberately steers away from the translations, so that these can be discussed in more detail in the proper context.

need of clarification. Also, what does either ‘affirmation’ or ‘denial’ have to do with the possession of truth?

The statement as such can be divided into two parts. The premise which Aristotle wants us to assume on the one hand, and the list of the five ‘states of the soul’ on the other. This division can be seen to provide an axis within Book VI, where the first two chapters lead up to this statement and contextualise some of the problematic parts which were just mentioned. The rest of Book VI is then devoted to discussing the list of the ‘five states of the soul’ which can acquire ‘truth’ (or knowledge), and how this can be understood to happen.

Book VI in its own right plays a significant role in the larger context of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as it provides the detailed basis for the intellectual virtues which are often referred to throughout the text. This leads to the initial conclusion that Book VI, as a significant part of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the statement in 1139b:15-18, as a focal point of this book, warrant further investigation to gain a better understanding of the statement itself, and its significance in Aristotle’s argument to gain a deeper understanding of his approach.

### **1.3. Research Approach**

#### **1.3.1. Translation and understanding**

It is the intention to study the five ‘states of the soul’ mentioned in the specified statement to gain a better understanding of this idea which Aristotle proposes. However, as mentioned above, the first part of this statement poses various problems. Thus, to make any serious attempt at gaining some deeper insight into this statement, part one thereof needs to be clarified. This shall be done in chapter two, in which the context and framework of the statement will be established, and where initial potential ambiguities will be addressed.

As already mentioned, the focus of this study lies on **understanding**. This is always hampered when one works with translations (cf. Ackrill 1973: 35; cf. Urmson 1988: 4–6) as these can never replicate the exact meaning of the original. A word-for-word translation of the text would have been problematic too, however, as the ideas and expressions, socio-cultural background and socio-political environmental familiarity assumed in the text on the one hand, and of the modern reader on the other, are so vastly different, that extensive attempts at interpretation would have to be involved for a reasonable comprehension. As it turns out, every translation already **has** a certain degree of inherent

interpretation to give a reasonable reflection of the semantics of the text. This may turn out as an advantage. By using different translations, and by comparing these with one another, one can attain a richer interpretive description of the meanings associated with words and statements, and thereby reach a fuller, more rounded understanding of the possible meaning of the original. This phenomenon may be increased by using translations into various languages. As every language has its own limits, it also holds the potential to express an idea in a unique way. What started out as a drawback turns into an advantage by employing this specific characteristic to enrich the depth of meaning and understanding of the original text. Thus, a greater degree of insight can be attained into the semantics of the text. To this end, translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* into English, German, and Dutch will be employed.

As mentioned earlier, in Book VI Aristotle contextualises and defines (to some extent) what he means by the words he uses to describe the five ‘states of the soul’. This enables the modern reader to form an understanding of his ideas, even without the “perfect” translation. Thus, in comparing the different versions of translations with the descriptions Aristotle provides of his ideas, it is possible to appraise the semantics of the text, and thus to choose the most fitting translations in every instance. Surely, this method is not fool-proof; however, it may ameliorate the effect of the translation.

### 1.3.2. Current discourse

An issue which has arisen in the second half of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup> and has become a significant point of contention lies at the fundamental understanding of Aristotle’s ethics. This issue revolves around the nature of *eudaimonia*, the good and happy life, the goal of life which Aristotle proposes. There are as many suggestions to the proper understanding of this concept as there are philosophers involved in this discourse. However, these may be largely grouped into two opposing categories, the inclusivists and the exclusivists or intellectualists.

The fundamental difference between these two concerns Aristotle’s conception of the *eudaimon* life. The inclusivists contend that the *eudaimon* life includes all the virtues, and virtuous activity. The exclusivists argue, however, because in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle singles out contemplation as the highest good and most desirable ‘activity’, that *theōria* must be the superior intellectual virtue (Knight 2007: 16). Thus, whereas the inclusivists consider a culmination of virtuous activity an enrichment of satisfaction, the intellectualists (exclusivists) consider it a pollution of, or a distraction from, the superior virtue. Both sides have appealing arguments (cf. Hughes 2001: 27 – 33,

---

<sup>2</sup> This dilemma is probably older, but has moved into the focus of discourse only more recently (cf. Knight 2007: 15).

Knight 2007: 15–40, Richardson Lear 2004: 2<sup>3</sup>, Urmson 1988: 119–120), which has led to the result that still no consensus has been reached.

Although the subject matter of **this** study is not directly involved with this issue, it is necessary to realise how it relates to this dispute. Inherent in this discourse is the habit of grouping the intellectual virtues into two groups; those which fall under practical application and those which are considered ‘purely’ theoretical. Thus, the intellectualists make a case for the superiority of the theoretical virtues, whereas the inclusivists propagate the importance of the practical application of the theory, which seems to culminate in the virtue *phronēsis*, or practical wisdom. The virtue in which *theōria* finds its pinnacle is usually identified with philosophical wisdom (*sophia*), but sometimes also as intuitive reason (*nous*) (Urmson 1988: 121). Distinguishing one virtue as the superior representative of either side (theoretical – practical) often results in a qualitative elevation of one intellectual virtue which, when practised, results in a qualitatively better life.

Had this been Aristotle’s intention, should one not then expect him to have qualified one virtue as the superior virtue, and listing the others as subjugated proponents or constituents thereof? In the statement which this study focuses on, such a distinction is not made. In fact, it would seem that all five ‘states of the soul’ are listed as qualitatively equal (or at least similar) intellectual virtues which enable one to ‘possess truth’. Perhaps a closer study of these five ‘states of the soul’ and of Aristotle’s explanation of these will fill a gap in understanding the greater discussion around the topic of *eudaimonia*.

It is not the intention to imply with this study the correctness of either side of the dispute, although, due to the nature of this investigation, an affinity towards the inclusivist<sup>4</sup> approach will be evident. The primary objective of this study is to gain a better understanding of the five ‘states of the soul’. It will be investigated whether a stronger interconnectedness or a closer overlap of the individual ‘states’ may be assumed than is generally the case, or whether there is, indeed, overwhelming evidence in Book VI to assume the qualitative superiority of one ‘state of the soul’.

---

<sup>3</sup> Richardson Lear gives a short list of the main contenders of both sides, i.e. the inclusivist and the exclusivist (monistic) interpretation.

<sup>4</sup> Richardson Lear confines ‘inclusivist’ to expect that the good life includes **all possible** goods the potential happy man desires, i.e. he cannot be happy if anything is missing. This is not the interpretation this study presumes to lean to, but rather, towards the possibility that the good life is not the exclusive domain of **one** good, or **one** activity.

## 1.4. Method

The investigation of the text will primarily be in the form of an intra-textual analysis of the English translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle<sup>5</sup>, with the focus on Book VI. Translations into other languages will be used to form a richer understanding of the meaning and the semantics of the text where obvious ambiguities present themselves, however, this study should not be regarded as a formal comparison of translations. Rather, in conjunction with what Aristotle describes in his text, and with a combined reading of the different translations, a contextual understanding of the ‘states of the soul’ will be sought.

The structure of the study is such that each ‘state of the soul’ forms a chapter on its own. In every chapter a set of questions will guide the investigation. These will include the following:

- In Book VI, what does Aristotle say about this ‘state of the soul’?
- How does Aristotle propose that one possesses (accesses) truth by virtue of this ‘state of the soul’?
- In which way is this ‘state of the soul’ theoretical or practical, or a combination of both?
- What role does this ‘state of the soul’ play in the context of the *Nicomachean Ethics*?

Aristotle’s descriptions function as the primary guide in this study, and secondary sources only provide connections to current subjects of discourse in a navigational capacity, such as the dispute mentioned above. Thus, the analysis takes the form of a discovery, including the reader on its search for understanding, examining every part step-by-step, beginning with the basic and obvious statements and, by weaving them together, arriving at the more complex insights and implications which this text presents. In this way, even a reader who is not familiar with Aristotle’s ethical philosophy will be able to follow the analysis and acquire a firm grasp of some of the essential principles and contentions of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

## 1.5. Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to form a better **understanding** of the five ‘states of the soul’ which Aristotle mentions in Book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Although he explains and describes what he means by these in Book VI, he tends to mix his discussions somewhat, which results in a degree of obscurity. By extracting the information on every ‘state of the soul’ on its own, it will

---

<sup>5</sup> In Ackrill 1973, who revised the translation from Ross, W. D., see Ackrill (1973: 35).

become clearer what role each ‘state of the soul’ plays. The relationships between these ‘states’ will also become clearer.

The secondary objective is to add a small contribution to the discourse on Aristotle’s ethics by elucidating an essential part thereof. As mentioned above, Aristotle’s conception of the ‘happy life’ (*eudaimonia*) consists of a combination of moral and intellectual virtues. Thus, as a fundamental constituent of the ethical concept which Aristotle proposes, a clearer understanding of the ‘states of the soul’ should contribute to the understanding of their function in the greater ethical process, and their function of, or for, *eudaimonia*.

This study approaches the *Nicomachean Ethics* from a point outside of it and invites the uninitiated reader to explore some of the initial ideas which Aristotle presents. Rather than focusing on the extreme complexities of subtle differences of meanings with which so many texts seem obsessed, this study presents an exploration of some of Aristotle’s basic ideas. Although this may frustrate the expert reader, it will hopefully render the text more accessible to the newly interested reader.<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, it is humbling to read that Professor J. O. Urmson admits in his introduction to his work on Aristotle’s ethics that, even after teaching Aristotle’s ethics for over thirty-four years, he continues to ‘understand, or ceas[es] to misunderstand, some passage’ (Urmson 1988: 4) of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Thus, in the relatively short investigation that follows it can by no means be assumed that a major contribution shall be made to the ethical discourse on Aristotle. If a small part of the puzzle can be added, the greater picture may be enriched. This is the aspiration of this study.

## 1.6. Expected Results

It is expected that this investigation will provide a better and clearer understanding of the role of the five ‘states of the soul’ in acquiring truth or knowledge, and of their role as intellectual virtues.

I will try to demonstrate that these are not as clearly definable as “theoretical” and “practical” as is commonly done, but that they may all hold a share in both theory and practical application, and that their applicability differentiates them, rather than their qualitative value. I will further attempt to show that these are meant to collaborate and support each other, rather than to vie for superiority. This would

---

<sup>6</sup> As an example, Richardson Lear (2004) builds a great deal of her argument around the possible meaning(s) of *telos*, or what it means to be an Aristotelian end. Although highly interesting, it becomes quite complex and leaves the non-specialist wondering what the discussion is all about. In this study, I try to focus on the contextual explanations Aristotle himself offers, striving for clarity rather than complexity.

mean that an optimal use of intellectual virtues should imply the excellent use of every ‘state of the soul’ according to its function and the context or situation which confronts it. This would clearly not support the contention that happiness consists of the exclusive use of **one** ‘state of the soul’, but rather, an inclusive cooperation of **all** states. However, this does not point at the inclusive possession of all **goods** (which is how Richardson Lear presents inclusivism). Either way, this analysis **should** help clarify the roles of the five ‘states of the soul’.

## 1.7. Practical Notes

Aristotle’s audience seems to have comprised mainly (or perhaps solely) of male students. There are some indications that he didn’t necessarily limit his ideas of happiness to males (see chapter 6.2), although the socio-cultural role of women would have limited their potential to engage in such activities which Aristotle presumes to belong to the “good and happy life”. It is not hard to imagine that in the modern, westernised society, Aristotle would include both sexes in his understanding to potentially acquire such a “good life” as he presents. However, this can only ever remain conjecture. None the less, to facilitate the flow between Aristotle’s work and the arguments in discourse with these, I have chosen to use the masculine pronouns – although I am convinced that his ideas apply to everyone equally.

In this I am following Urmson (1988: Preface) for similar reasons. Knight (2007) shows his opposition to the institutionalised method of the masculine pronoun and uses the feminine. This demonstrates his attitude towards gender equality, but does not change the fact that one gender is used as representative of both. It does, however, complicate the ease of following his argument<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> The fact that Aristotle always uses the masculine pronoun in his examples, or speaks of the ‘supremely happy **man**’, is due to the gender system of the Greek language, a feature of which is the inclusive reference of many masculine forms.

## 2. Analysis of Part 1 of the statement

It was mentioned in the previous chapter that the statement under investigation presents a number of problems, especially its first part. To clarify which part is being discussed here, the statement will be shown once again, with Part I in bold print.

**Let it be assumed that the states by virtue of which the soul possesses truth by way of affirmation or denial are five in number**<sup>8</sup>, i.e. art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, intuitive reason;  
(1139b 15-18)

As was mentioned in the Introduction this statement can be regarded as forming an axis in Book VI. Chapters one and two lead up to this statement and introduce and contextualise the ideas which are proposed in this book. Thus, to understand the context of the statement, and especially Part I thereof, these first two chapters have to be analysed.

Part I, as it is shown above, can be divided into five sections: ‘Let it be assumed’, ‘the states by virtue of which the soul’, ‘possesses truth’, ‘by way of affirmation or denial’, and ‘are five in number’. In this chapter these sections will initially be analysed on their own to clarify some important points, and to introduce some important concepts with which to approach Book VI and the *Ethics*.

‘Let it be assumed’ and ‘are five in number’ belong together and form an *inclusio*. Aristotle is making an assumption which he proposes and describes. He is not defending the **number** of states he proposes belong into this category. Thus, the question whether there might rather be four or six states is never looked into. Rather, Aristotle has made an observation of a phenomenon, and argues that there are a number of different states of the soul which show distinct characteristics, and in his contemplation of the phenomenon he recognises five. Once again, he argues for the states, not the number of such. Whether this holds true, or at least seems reasonable, can then be considered at the end of the study. At this point he merely asks his reader to make this assumption as a starting point.

At this stage it may be helpful to clarify what Aristotle means with ‘soul’. In chapter two of Book VI he provides an overview of the parts of the soul (as he understands it), which is sufficient to start this investigation. Aristotle recognises in the soul virtues of character and virtues of intellect (1139a). He also asserts that ‘there are two parts of the soul – that which grasps a rule or rational principle, and the irrational’ (1139a 4–5). It is not clear whether the irrational *necessarily* belongs to the intellectual part

---

<sup>8</sup> This part of the statement is henceforth referred to as ‘Part I’.

of the soul, but can reasonably be assumed to do so<sup>9</sup>. However, this is not crucial to this study, as he continues his line of thought in pursuit of the **rational** part. The part that grasps a rational principle is further divided into two parts – one by which the contemplation of variable, changing things is done, and which is calculative; the other by which invariable, unchanging or eternal things are contemplated. And beginning with chapter two, Aristotle asserts that, also belonging to the soul, are sensation, reason and desire. Thus, this description of the soul resembles the psyche as it is generally understood in the twentieth century, which incorporates conscious (and possibly subconscious) thought, the character attributes and the behavioural tendencies and emotions of a person.

The next problem to be addressed is the idea of ‘states’ of the soul. Aristotle also speaks of ‘states of character’ (1138b 20). Ackrill (1973: 28) describes them as ‘powers and dispositions of the mind’<sup>10</sup>. These seem to be capacities, faculties, or means of the soul which enable it to act towards, or engage with, a knowable object in a certain way. Of course, the more specific description and exact function or character of these ‘states’ is the topic of this investigation. Greater clarity will hopefully be gained by the end of this study.

‘Possesses truth’ poses various problems which were already touched on in the Introduction. To possess something implies a sense of stagnation – to keep it, perhaps defend it. It also gives the impression that the possessed object is finite, and, once gotten, is had. Is this what Aristotle proposes truth to be? Is it something one either has, or does not have, and which can be gotten, or possessed, in an act?

The other problem is posed by ‘truth’. In light of the questions just posed, is it supposed to be a finite “packaged” quantity which can be possessed, or lost? Is Aristotle referring to truth as an absolute, or to a relative truth? Once again, he offers some indications of what he means in the two introductory chapters. Aristotle introduces Book VI by referring to his earlier discussion on the determination of a mean, or intermediary, state which results in good action and behaviour, as part of virtuous conduct. This mean is ‘determined by the dictates of the right rule’ (1138b 19), and Aristotle indicates that he intends to discuss the nature of these dictates. And somewhat later he states, as his intention for this section (Book VI):

---

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle introduces the discussion as follows: Now we have discussed in detail the moral virtues; with regard to the others [i.e. of the intellect] let us express our view as follows, beginning with some remarks about the soul.

<sup>10</sup> In the translations the following options are provided: ‘Grundformen der Seele’ (Dirlmeier 1969, 2008), ‘Mittel der Seele’ (Gigon 1972, 1981), ‘disposities van de ziel’ (Hupperts & Poortman 2005).

Hence it is necessary with regard to the states of the soul [...] that it should be determined what is the **right rule** and what is the standard that fixes it.  
(1138b 32–34)

It is evident that Aristotle places the following discussion firmly within the framework of virtuous action and the determination of the mean. That this may be extended to some degree can be inferred from his statement in 1138b 26–27:

... for not only here but **in all other pursuits** which are objects of knowledge it is indeed true ... (my emphasis).

Thus, in pursuits which are objects of knowledge, one must find a standard or ‘the mark to which the man who has the rule looks’, to determine the best choice for a situation. But how is this to be done?

In his dissection of the soul, especially into the rational parts, Aristotle argues that parts within the soul ‘answer’ to objects of knowledge with which they share a certain ‘likeness and kinship’ (1139a 10), which generally fall into the categories of the ‘calculative’ and the ‘scientific’<sup>11</sup>, or the ‘variable’ and the ‘invariable’<sup>12</sup>. This is the form of truth Aristotle seems to mean, one that is relative to a situation, and which can be sought, pursued, and which reveals itself, or is revealing. This sheds light on some of the problems, both of truth and of the ‘possession’ thereof. Aristotle adds some more thoughts on this, but these are also connected to the next part-statement which needs clarification. At the end of that discussion, additional aspects to the ‘possession of truth’ will become evident.

Because all these part-statements come from one whole-statement they are necessarily interrelated. Unsurprisingly then, ‘by means of affirmation or denial’ sheds some light on the ‘possession of truth’. By extracting the part-statements, these relationships become more evident, however. Chapter two starts with the contention (which was introduced earlier in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) that the ‘virtue (or excellence) of a thing is relative to its proper work’ (1139a 16). Thus, a knife is excellent if it cuts well. It fulfils its function well<sup>13</sup>. Aristotle then discusses the function of reason and desire in relation to action and truth, and determines that this is choice. He surmises that good choice is rooted in the knowledge of the truth of a situation and the deliberate action towards that. This is achieved by the proper use, or fulfilment of the functions, of reason and desire. These have specific tools at their

---

<sup>11</sup> Clearly, these terms should not be understood in the modern sense. How they *are* to be understood will be investigated under the relevant ‘states of the soul’.

<sup>12</sup> By piecing together what Aristotle advances in chapter two about the two parts of the soul the following can be shown: Part I of rational soul = ‘by which we contemplate **variable** things’ = ‘**calculative/deliberative**’; Part II of rational soul = ‘by which we contemplate the kind of things whose originative causes are **invariable**’ = ‘**scientific**’.

<sup>13</sup> This idea plays a larger role in the ethics and will receive greater attention at a later stage in this study.

disposal. For thinking, these are affirmation and denial, for desire they are pursuit and avoidance. This is the practical part of the intellect. For the contemplative part, these are recognised as true and false. This demonstrates the interaction of the different parts of the soul.

Thus, good action is achieved by good choice. Good choice is achieved by the employment of reason and desire in relation to a good end (or goal) (1139a 33). And the good end is recognised by the contemplative faculty which recognises truth. This sounds simple enough, and yet remains completely abstract. Aristotle has aimed here to reduce action, and especially *good* action, to its first principles. Having reduced it thus, he has prepared his audience for the discussion of the different states of the soul which are implicitly engaged in this process. Truth, he argues, is the aim (or work) of both intellectual parts, which contemplate the variable and the invariable (eternal) things. This means that truth has a variable and an invariable (eternal) element to it, and both are intended in the axial statement of Book VI, which is the focus of this study. Having found the first principles, Aristotle now departs from them to discuss the practical aspects, and the subtle differences of the intellectual processes in this context. He starts with an assumption, and says:

**Let it be assumed** that the states by virtue of which the soul possesses truth by way of affirmation or denial are five in number, i.e. art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, intuitive reason; (1139b 15–18)

### 3. ‘Art’ (*technē*)

#### 3.1. *Technē* in Book VI

In this study, when referring to states of the soul, the Greek term in transliteration will be used, to make clear, as much as possible, what is being spoken of. There is a “thing” that Aristotle points at with the term *technē* (in this case). This term is translated with the English term ‘art’, but it obviously does not have the same **meaning** as art, in general<sup>14</sup>. Thus, when referring to the same “thing” that Aristotle refers to, the term *technē* will be used. And what exactly Aristotle **means** by this will, hopefully, become apparent by investigating what he says about *technē*, and references he makes to it in specific contexts, and what forms of knowledge or occupation he considers to be a *technē*. However, to preserve the intellectual integrity of the source material, the term ‘art’ will remain as is where Aristotle is cited from the English translation, but should be understood as *technē*, which will become evident in the corresponding discussions. This practice will naturally also be applied to the other chapters and their corresponding transliterated Greek terms.

Although there are many references to *technē* (‘art’) throughout Book VI, chapter four thereof is devoted almost entirely to it. Aristotle expresses in one sentence, almost definition-like, what he considers to be the essential principle of *technē*:

[A]rt is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning. (1140a 8–9)

He then looks at what *technē* in general concerns itself with:

All art is concerned with coming into being, i.e. with contriving and considering how something may come into being which is capable of either being or not being, and whose origin is in the maker, not in the thing made; for art is concerned neither with things that are, or come into being, by necessity, nor with things that do so in accordance with nature (since these have their origin in themselves). (1140a 9–16)

Aristotle is here referring to the different parts of the soul which he had addressed in chapters one and two of Book VI. *Technē*, thus, is recognised by that part of the soul which ‘contemplates variable things’ (Book VI, Ch. 1). In chapter two, where Aristotle tries to reduce action and choice to its first principles, he has the following to say about intellect:

Intellect itself, however, moves nothing, but only the intellect which aims at an end and is practical; for this rules the **productive** intellect as well, since everyone who

---

<sup>14</sup> The domain of art will correspond in **some** parts to the domain of *technē*, similarly to the case where the domain of “sword” corresponds to the domain of “weapon”. What the domain of *technē* is, is the subject of this chapter.

makes makes for an end, and that which is made is not an end in the unqualified sense (but only an end in a particular relation, and an end of a particular operation)... (1139a 34–1139b 3)

It becomes evident that *technē* is practical, concerned with the particular, and with the contemplation of things that are variable (or not necessarily so). It produces something. It involves reasoning towards an end along a course, which can be true or false, better or worse. All this may seem somewhat superfluous. However, when dealing with first principles, it becomes necessary to state things which may at times seem obvious. In his differentiation of the states of the soul which possess (or attain) truth, Aristotle uses these principal cornerstones to demarcate their different fields.

Thus, returning to *technē*, it is ruled by the productive intellect, which in turn is ruled by the ‘intellect which aims at an end and is practical’. Its end is particular, and its excellence is bound to the result of the particular operation. This seems obvious of *technē*, if it is confined to the expressive arts. That these are included in Aristotle’s conception of *technē* is confirmed in chapter seven:

*Wisdom* in the arts we ascribe to their most finished exponents, e.g. to Phidias as a sculptor and to Polyclitus as a maker of portrait-statues, and here we mean nothing by wisdom except excellence in art; (1141a 9–12)

Expressive art, such as sculpturing or portrait making, is clearly included here, and ‘wisdom’ (or excellence) therein is limited to the proficiency shown in its extant pieces, the particular cases. However, Aristotle considers *technē* to cover a wider range. In Book VI (chapter one, and elsewhere) Aristotle refers to the ‘medical art’, in chapter four he states that ‘architecture is an art’, and in chapter seven he refers to ‘the art of politics’. All this shows that Aristotle does not confine *technē* to the expressive arts, but extends this category to any activity which is described by his initial definition of the essential principles of *technē*: i.e. that it is ‘a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning’, that it considers a ‘coming into being’ of something which is not so out of necessity, and that it is productive, with particular ends in sight.

A short digression to the other translations may be helpful at this point, to see whether they corroborate the inferences made from the context. The German translations use ‘Kunst’ and ‘praktisches Können’, the Dutch uses ‘vakbekwaamheid’. ‘Praktisches Können’ implies knowledge and ability in practical matters, and ‘vakbekwaamheid’ implies proficiency within a certain field. ‘Kunst’ is as ambiguous as the English ‘art’. Additionally, the Greek word itself, ‘*technē*’, is easily recognisable in terms such as technique and technical application. Certainly, care must be taken to avoid conclusions by superficial inferences (see problems with translations above). However, these seem to confirm, rather than

contradict, the inferences made from the context of Aristotle's explanations, and on this ground alone, may affirm the initial understanding of *technē* so far. This can now be further scrutinised in the larger context of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

### 3.2. *Technē* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

*Technē* plays a prominent role in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and so it is not surprising that it is included in the opening lines of Book I. What becomes evident within the first two chapters is the seemingly imperceptible line between 'arts' and the 'sciences'. This is probably because these fields<sup>15</sup> have both, a theoretical background or foundation (a body of knowledge one first has to be acquainted with), and a sphere of practical application in which this knowledge is demonstrated or given expression. This demonstration or expression results in a product, of which Aristotle lists some examples:

Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends are also many; the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. (1094a 6–9)

The term 'ends' connotes a wider range than the term 'products'. Thus, for instance, the end of "medicine as a 'science'" is health in general, whereas the end of the "'art' of medicine" is the health of a particular person, and this would be its product. That this is so will become clearer during the investigation.

There are three points, which I will attempt to demonstrate, about the fundamental role *technē* plays in Aristotle's conception of ethics. One, that Aristotle uses *technē* as a metaphor, as a parallel and a guideline, concerning matters of the soul; two, that Aristotle considers the moral and intellectual virtues as a *technē*, and an individual's life as the product (good or bad) of this 'art'; and three, that the political philosopher is a 'technician' and the citizenry his medium.

#### 3.2.1. The first two points about the role of *technē*

The first two points will be investigated first. Aristotle is occupied by the dynamics of the soul and how these influence such things as behaviour, choices, and the state of wellbeing. This is a difficult task considering the indiscernible nature of the soul. However, he sees a way around this problem:

[T]o gain light on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things.  
(1104a 17)

---

<sup>15</sup>"Fields" is used as a neutral term to denote whatever 'arts' and 'sciences' are pointing at. In chapter one, for instance, Aristotle says, 'where such **arts** fall under a single capacity...', he mentions some examples, and then ends the chapter with 'as in the case of the **sciences** just mentioned'.

He is also careful enough not to delve into all the unknowns too far, as this would prevent any real progress in the endeavour. He cautiously approaches his subject and prepares his audience for the task at hand:

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as our subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the **products of the crafts**.

[...] for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits. (1094b 12–13; 23–25)

Thus, it is sufficient to have as much information as is necessary to continue practically, even if some of this information will have to be taken at face value for the time being, and, as is often done in the crafts, may subsequently be tried and tested on its medium. It is also helpful to understand from the beginning, what picture Aristotle has in mind when he considers good works of art<sup>16</sup>:

[W]e often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists we say, look to this in their work. (1106b 10–13)

Aristotle envisions a state of excellence which hangs in the balance of just enough, and not too much, and sees its best example in art. Similarly, he reasons, such a state of excellence should be found in behaviour, in emotions, in pursuits of life<sup>17</sup>. Thus, this is an important mental picture to accompany the reading of Aristotle's ethics, and may aid in clarifying many of his ideas. Aristotle refers to 'good works of art', but then pursues this idea of 'good', whether it is one 'thing', or many, and how or where this is to be found.

[...] it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine it is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end; for it is for the sake of **this** that all men do whatever else they do. (1097a 16 – 20)

This statement echoes the one mentioned above, and is indeed also concerned with the 'ends' of pursuits, or the different fields of *technē*, and identifies these as their 'good'. It is in response to Plato's Form of "**the good**", in the sphere of Ideas, that Aristotle tries to find a practical solution to this. Once again, when confronted with the unreachable, he makes use of *technē* as an aid in his pursuit:

It is hard, too, to see how a weaver or a carpenter will be benefited in regard to his own craft by knowing this 'good itself', or how the man who has viewed the Idea will be a better doctor or general thereby. For a doctor seems not even to study health in

---

<sup>16</sup> Not *technē*, but art in its narrower sense.

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Kraut (2009) in this point who explicitly points this out.

this way, but the health of man, or perhaps rather the health of a particular man; it is individuals that he is healing. (1097a 8 –14)

In other words, the good of a certain pursuit is realised in the particular demonstration or articulation of its particular form of ‘knowledge’. Thus, the ‘end’ and the ‘good’ for a doctor is health in general, or the practicing of his *technē* in pursuit of the health of his patient in the particular case. Having established the nature of the relation of a *technē* to its end, and thus its good, Aristotle now makes the crucial connection to his actual investigation. He does this by way of inquiring after the function of man.

For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function, so it would seem to be for man, if he has a function. (1097b 24–28)

[T]he function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well. (1098a 11–12)

Using the lyre-player as an example, Aristotle tries to show that, if the function of man can be known, then exercising this function **well** should result in the good of man. In light of this the opening lines of the *Nicomachean Ethics* make a lot more sense:

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. (1094a 1–3)

Thus, by looking at what every *technē*, inquiry and action aims at in its own right, Aristotle hopes to find a final end and good, which may lie behind the intermediary ends and goods of particular actions. Once again he uses a metaphor to emphasise his intention. He compares his search for such an end and a good to an archer.

Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is, and of which of the sciences or capacities it is the object. (1094a 22–27)

The metaphor of the archer accompanies Aristotle’s entire ethical dialogue like a shadow, sometimes to be explicitly referred to, at other instances providing the mental picture as the context of the one or other statement. The entire argument is based on the idea that, as an educated individual who has the desire to lead a meaningful life, this individual is like an archer who finds a mark and can aim at it. If this search for such an end does not occur, one might be like an archer who has the potential to shoot, but does not see a mark to aim for – and thus, misses his purpose and fails to fulfil his function.

In chapter four of Book I Aristotle announces, quite unceremoniously, what he thinks this mark, this ‘chief end’ and ‘good’, is:

[B]oth the general run of men and the people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy. (1095a 17–20)

Aristotle is quick enough to add that, although all men seem to think of happiness in this regard, they have very different notions of what happiness is, or consists of. And so, Aristotle tries to find, in his logical and reasonable manner, a well thought-out and well-rounded description of happiness. This is essentially what the *Nicomachean Ethics* is about.

### 3.2.2. The *technē* of happiness

It has already been suggested that man has a function, and that the searching man (the ‘archer’) will look for his mark and try to perform his function well (like the lyre-player). In chapter seven of Book I Aristotle reasons that the function of a thing is what sets it apart from other things, is part of its peculiar identity. A knife is not just a piece of steel, but one that is intended for cutting, and a good knife will cut well. What is it, then, that makes man different from other things? What is peculiar about man? Life, nutrition and growth, says Aristotle, is common also among plants. Perception and movement are common to every animal. Man, however, is the only one with reason. It is his ability to think and reason that sets him apart from other animals. Thus, this must be his function. And in that same train of thought, if he is to be a good man, he is to perform his function well, and thus he is to make good use of his reason.<sup>18</sup>

[W]e state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence, [then] human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. (1098a 12–17)

Aristotle discusses many detailed aspects of what people say about happiness, or what others believe. It becomes obvious that the nature of happiness does not seem to be so straight forward. However, if one considers what type of man one admires, this is usually one who is wise, noble, does good and noble actions, and this, not because he has to, but because he delights in these and recognises their value.

If this is so, virtuous actions must be in themselves pleasant. But they are also *good* and *noble* (Ackrill’s emphasis). (1099a 20–21)

---

<sup>18</sup> Hughes (2001: 36 – 41) offers an enlightening discussion on the ‘function argument’.

And he concludes that ‘Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world’ (1099a 24). Having established what he aims for, Aristotle consequently inquires about the nature of virtues, their role in the formation of character, and how the combination of all these influences social interaction and personal well-being. He takes a very pragmatic look at happiness, and once again the idea of *technē* is at hand. He recognises that ...

[...] it is not easy to do noble acts without the proper **equipment**. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as **instruments**. (1099b 1–2)

Although Aristotle recognises that these external goods play a role in the happy life, he insists that it is the virtues and the ‘goods of the soul’ which have the greatest bearing on the outcome of life.

To return to the metaphor of the archer, Aristotle considers the archer to have the bow and arrow, and the question is whether he finds a mark to aim at, and whether he is able to hit the mark. The potential is there, but only the knowledge and the practice of archery can equip the archer to aim and hit a mark consistently. In chapter one of Book II he uses another *technē* as a metaphor to explain this.

Again it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. (1103b 8–13)

Thus, the potential is there to do acts, to behave, and also to do something good incidentally. But, to become good, as Aristotle sees it, the virtues need to be taught and learnt, just as one learns the proper actions of a craft, or *technē*. This is once more emphasised in the following:

[T]he virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. (1103a 32 – 1103b 2)

Aristotle makes good use of his metaphor, that life is like a *technē*, like an art, which must be learnt, practiced, and continually engaged in if it is to be any good. But the metaphor tells us more than just this. The lyre-player does not just play the lyre, nor does the builder merely heap up bricks. The lyre-player produces music, and the builder constructs a house. What then does the *technē* of virtue produce? Aristotle contends that this is happiness. And if this is done as he suggests, this will not just be a fleeting moment, but a fulfilled life of happiness, which has the sense of completeness. He calls this *eudaimonia*. As has been stated earlier, there is some contention over exactly what this should contain and what exactly Aristotle seemed to understand by it. This will not be entirely resolved here.

However, some insights on what might be included in this will be gained in the course of this study. What is clear, in any case, is that *eudaimonia* is that final ‘good’ and end which Aristotle aims his ethics and his philosophy at. That this is not only good but also pleasant is clearly stated in Book X:

For an activity is intensified by its proper pleasure, since each class of things is better judged of and brought to precision by those who engage in the activity with pleasure; [...] those who are fond of music or of building, and so on, make progress in their proper function by enjoying it. (1175a 30–36)

And this is not only the mark at which Aristotle aims his arrow (so to say), but it is also the product of the *technē* which Aristotle describes in the ethics, which includes activity of the soul according to a rational principle, and noble and virtuous actions. Now, considering what has been said earlier about good works of art, of which nothing should be taken, and to which nothing should be added, it can be seen that Aristotle considers *eudaimonia* to be similar to that.

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well – by looking to the intermediate and judging its works by this standard, [...] and if, further, virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, the virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. (1106b 8–16)

Thus, *eudaimonia* is a work of art (in romantic terms), or the product of a *technē* of the soul, of which nothing should be taken away and to which nothing should be added. This description, however, is in danger of sounding very static. In fact, the idea of the intermediary or the mean plays a very dynamic role in Aristotle’s ethics. This will become more evident in due course. It accompanies his moral and intellectual theories as a directing principle. The following two examples from Book II already point to this:

Thus the master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this – **the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us**. (1106b 6–7)

[...] it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health [...] both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, **while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it**. (1104a 11–19)

Two important points have been highlighted here. One, that Aristotle realises that the intermediate or proportionate is not in the object, but depends on the particular situation and person. This means that the mean cannot be standardized quantitatively, and that it must be proportioned to the particular. The consequence of this is that his ethics cannot be summed up in a formula, and that he expects agents (individuals) to judge for themselves and take responsibility.

The other important point is that the intermediary is not a half-measure, but the proper amount which produces and increases and preserves its product (e.g. health). That this must be understood as a guiding principle is once again shown in the following statement:

The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation. (1104a 5–9)

### 3.2.3. The *technē* of politics

The role of politics in Aristotle's ethical theory plays a significant role<sup>19</sup>. This could easily form the subject of an entire study. Here, it is merely the aim to point out an additional aspect of *technē* in its context of the ethics, and in light of the previous discussion. In Book I, where Aristotle considers the ends of the different 'sciences and arts', he also looks for the *technē* which should be responsible for determining that final end, and of which 'science' it should be the object. He reasons:

It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature: for it is this that ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; [...] since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man. (1094a 27 – 1094b 7)

Aristotle seems to consider politics a super-scientific, over-arching managerial capacity, in charge of assigning a place and degree to every other *technē*. Thus, where the individual is like an archer who looks for a mark to aim at for his own life, the political philosopher<sup>20</sup> looks at a mark to aim at for the *polis* and its citizens. This is pointed towards in the statement:

The true student of politics, too, is thought to have studied virtue above all things; for he wishes to **make** his fellow citizens good and obedient to the laws. (1102a 7–9)

The student of politics then should understand, not only what his own life should aim at, but what the 'life of a *polis*' should aim at, and how this should best be done. Aristotle identifies two main points of interest at which, he thinks, the political philosopher should aim his efforts. These are the laws through legislation, and education, starting with the young. As Aristotle contends in Book X ...

---

<sup>19</sup> Besides the fact that Aristotle mentions politics on numerous occasions, it was only after reading Chroust (1973) that the magnitude of the role of politics in Aristotle's other texts (such as the *Nicomachean Ethics*) filtered through to me.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle sees a difference between the political philosopher involved in legislation and the politician involved in rhetoric and the daily implementation of laws. Here the student of politics and philosophy is addressed and thus the former is assumed.

... in educating the young we steer them by the rudders of pleasure and pain; it is thought, too, that to enjoy the things we ought and to hate the things we ought has the greatest bearing on virtue of character. (1172a 20–23)

In this way, people learn from a young age about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and the virtues of character, which Aristotle argues, is a major ingredient in *eudaimonia*. Of course, this sounds quite obvious, but Aristotle’s emphasis here is not merely on the ability to conform to societal rules, but on the inherent potential for the individual’s own happiness which is enabled by this. And this is the responsibility of the political philosopher, as is also evident in the following:

The study of pleasure and pain belongs to the province of the political philosopher; for **he is the architect** of the end, with a view to which we call one thing bad and another good without qualification. (1152b 1–3)

And the importance of good legislative abilities is once again addressed here:

And surely he who wants to make men, whether many or few, better by his care must try to become capable of legislating, if it is through laws that we become good. (1180b 23–25)

Thus emerges the political philosopher, as the architect of the character and virtues of the citizenry, using knowledge and legislation as his main tools – directing his work at the young through education, and at adults through the laws, he is the craftsman of the wellbeing of the state.

## 4. ‘Scientific Knowledge’ (*epistēmē*)

### 4.1. *Epistēmē* in Book VI

The second ‘state of the soul by virtue of which one can possess truth’ which Aristotle proposes is *epistēmē* (‘scientific knowledge’). As in the previous chapter concerning ‘art’, what Aristotle says about ‘scientific knowledge’ has to be studied very carefully, considering the clear concept one has of it from a modern perspective. Thus, it is best to consider it as one would a completely new concept – for which reason the term *epistēmē* is used, to emphasise that this is **Aristotle’s** term in **his** context – and, perhaps, only afterwards observe whether there are any similarities to the modern concept of “scientific” knowledge.

Once again, Book VI forms the starting point of the investigation, from which the significance within the context of the *Nicomachean Ethics* will then be studied. Here too, Aristotle provides an almost definition-like statement describing this state of the soul. He adds some additional boundaries and places it within the framework which he expounded in the first two chapters. The “definition” of *epistēmē* that Aristotle gives is:

Scientific knowledge is, then, a state of capacity to **demonstrate**, [...] for it is when a man believes in a certain way and the starting-points are known to him that he has scientific knowledge. (1139b 31–34)

The ‘starting-points’ and ‘when a man believes in a certain way’ refer to the relationship of induction and syllogism, which Aristotle explains as follows:

Now induction is the starting-point which knowledge even of the universal presupposes, while syllogism proceeds *from* universals. There are therefore starting-points from which syllogism proceeds, which are not reached by syllogism; it is therefore by induction that they are acquired. (1139b 28–30)

It is evident that Aristotle assumes a certain form of logic as an element of *epistēmē*, including universal starting-points, and syllogistic reasoning moving from these (towards the particular). The relationship between induction and syllogism will be scrutinised shortly. First, some other elements will be addressed.

Aristotle also states that ‘every science is thought to be capable of being taught, and its object of being learned’ (1139b 24–25) and that the ‘object of science is of necessity’, ‘eternal’, ‘ungenerated and imperishable’ (1139b 22–24). With this Aristotle clearly places ‘science’ within the grasp of that part of the rational soul by which one can ‘contemplate the kind of things whose originaive causes are

invariable' (1139a 7–8) which he proposed in chapter one. However, at the end of chapter one he also opposes the 'scientific' part to the 'calculative and deliberative' part of the rational soul, for 'no one deliberates about the invariable' (1139a 13). Thus, 'scientific' according to Aristotle, has nothing to do with calculation, or with planning. At the end of chapter two, he echoes this statement in the following way:

[...] for no one deliberates about the past, but about what is future and capable of being otherwise, while what is past is not capable of not having taken place.  
(1139b 6–7)

The past has already happened and cannot be otherwise, thus, in this sense, is eternal, invariable and unchangeable, and subject to necessity. It seems then that history conforms to Aristotle's concept of 'science'. But does he include more?

Aristotle uses the perspective of history (of the 'past') as an example of the type of truth the 'scientific' part of the soul grasps. More generally, he describes this type of truth as follows:

We all suppose that what we know is not even capable of being otherwise; of things capable of being otherwise we do not know, they have passed outside of our observation, whether they exist or not. (1139b 19–23)

One may cringe at this statement with the modern conception of science in mind. Just because one has not yet been confronted by an observation, does that mean it lies outside of the possibility of truth? Or, once one is convinced of a particular fact, is this then set in stone and cannot be otherwise?

Falsification and delimitation, the tools by which scientific knowledge and truth are constantly updated and improved seem to have no place in such a conception. However, this does not seem to be Aristotle's intention. At the beginning of this discussion, Aristotle's 'definition' of *epistēmē* clearly includes the capacity to **demonstrate**, and this is reiterated in chapter five (1140a 34) and chapter six where he states once more:

Scientific knowledge is judgement about things that are universal and necessary, and the **conclusions of demonstration**, and all scientific knowledge, follow from first principles (for scientific knowledge **involves proof**). (1140b 31–34)

What all these extracts seem to imply is a type of knowledge which is self-evident. One which can be taught, passed on, or if necessary, be illuminated by the demonstration of a logical series of events (facts), starting from self-evident universal facts as first principles, and moving from these toward more particular conclusions. Accordingly, Aristotle mentions as examples of particular sciences, 'medicine,

the science of things connected with health<sup>21</sup>, or geometry, the science of spatial magnitudes’ (1143a 3–5).

There are two more crucial statements Aristotle makes which need to be heeded before *epistēmē* can be studied in the wider context of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In chapter nine, in an effort to distinguish the natures of ‘inquiry’ and ‘deliberation’, and their excellence, he denies that they are forms of *epistēmē*, for ‘men do not inquire about the things they know about’, but ‘he who deliberates inquires and calculates’ (1142b 1–2). It is crucial to take note of this as a modern reader, precisely because the inquiry into, and calculation of, matters which are unknown, are fundamental elements of the scientific method in the modern sense.

The other statement which needs to be noted is in chapter two. In his discussion of the relationship of desire and reason, how these, by pursuit and avoidance, and affirmation and denial, respectively, navigate their way towards good choice, Aristotle says that:

[O]f the intellect which is contemplative, not practical nor productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual). (1139a 27–28)

Importantly, this does not apply only to *epistēmē*, but to all the intellectual theoretical states concerned with the universals. Aristotle describes here the parallels between the pursuits of desire and reason. The way desire urges one to negotiate physical situations toward ‘good states’, such as eating when hungry, evading a harmful blow, or choosing a warm spot when it is cold outside, so the intellect will urge one toward states in which it ‘is good’, which Aristotle contends, are states of truth. This basic idea should accompany the ongoing investigation in the context of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

## 4.2. *Epistēmē* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

To gain a better understanding of what Aristotle means with *epistēmē*, or ‘scientific knowledge’ in translation, the investigation is directed at comments of his about ‘science’, ‘scientific’, or subjects related to some of the clues given in Book VI, and to regard their contexts and uses throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* in pursuit of a clearer ‘Aristotelian’ conception of *epistēmē*. However, as mentioned previously, this is obscured somewhat in Book I by his use of ‘sciences’ and ‘arts’ almost interchangeably. In chapter one Aristotle discusses different ‘arts’, including medical arts, shipbuilding,

---

<sup>21</sup> The fact that Aristotle also refers to medicine as an art (see previous chapter) will be discussed later, when the relationship of the different states of the soul toward each other will be investigated.

strategy and economics. He introduces the idea by saying, ‘where such **arts** fall under a single capacity...’, and ends the discussion with ‘as in the case of the **sciences** just mentioned’ (1094a 6–17). This confusion continues in chapters two and three, and also elsewhere<sup>22</sup>, where politics is referred to as both an ‘art’ and a ‘science’. Interestingly, Aristotle speaks of sciences, generally, in these cases, and not of *epistēmē* (‘scientific knowledge’), in particular, which is the real focus of this inquiry. Whether this implies a substantial difference between the two must be investigated.

Another confusing difficulty arises out of contradictive applications of Aristotle’s ideas. In Book VI Aristotle clearly states that ‘men **do not inquire** about the things they know about’ (1142b 1), and that ‘scientific knowledge is judgement about things that are universal and necessary’, and yet in chapter three of Book I Aristotle regards the subject matter of political science thus:

Now fine and just actions, which political science **investigates**, exhibit much variety and fluctuation of opinion, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. (1094b 14–16)

In other words, political science **investigates**, and does this into something which seems to change and fluctuate. Perhaps Aristotle’s conceptual borders have been too stringently applied here. Another matter will now be pursued, the conclusion of which may, perhaps, help to resolve this tension.

The investigation of Book VI addressed another statement, concerning ‘when a man believes in a certain way and the starting-points are known to him’, which left an unresolved tension. However, as early as chapter four in Book I Aristotle introduces this idea:

Presumably, then, *we* must begin with things known to *us*. Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the fact is a starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him, he will not need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting-points. (1095b 3–8)

With Aristotle’s emphasis on the ‘teachability’ of *epistēmē*, this starts to fit together. Aristotle places an important role on the education of the young. In this case he refers to the importance of an upbringing in good habits, and about the subjects of political science, and the background of logical reasoning by which they can ‘easily get starting-points’. If a proper education and upbringing are inferred by ‘when a man believes in a certain way and the starting-points are known to him’, this may indicate what type of knowledge Aristotle considers *epistēmē* to be. He underlines this in Book II with the general

---

<sup>22</sup> There are numerous occasions of such confusion. More examples include gymnastics, referred to as an art in chapter one, and a science in chapter six. This confusion does not seem due to the English translation, as the other translations reflect it too.

statement that ‘intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time)’ (1103a 15–16). And that it takes time is also emphasised in Book VII:

[A]nd those who have just begun to learn a science can string together its phrases, but do not yet know it; for it has to become part of themselves, and **that takes time.** (1147a 20–24)

Thus, the knowledge of the sciences can be taught (or learnt), but it may take time for insight to develop and reveal its truer meaning (‘become part of themselves’). It has already been mentioned that universals are considered in this context. Fortunately, in Book III Aristotle gives some examples of what sort of information he considers to be ‘universal’:

Now about eternal things no one deliberates, e.g. about the material universe or the incommensurability of the diagonal and the side of a square. But no more do we deliberate about the things that involve movement but always happen in the same way, whether by necessity or by nature or from any other cause, e.g. the solstices and the risings of the stars; (1112a 22–26)

And somewhat further down he continues, mentioning the ‘case of exact and self-contained sciences [where] there is no deliberation, e.g. about the letters of the alphabet (for we have no doubt how they should be written)’ (1112a 34 – 1112b 2). These are examples of the type of information which is learnt at school, and once attained, may seem obvious and necessary. Aristotle takes it for granted that his audience understands this. What he actually tries to explain is the nature of deliberation, what it is or is not. In Book III he mentions that it is a form of inquiry, but that it is more limited than that. Aristotle states that ‘not all inquiry appears to be deliberation – for instance mathematical inquiries – but all deliberation is inquiry’ (1112b 21–23). Thus, deliberation is a type of inquiry (or calculation) of particulars which are within the achievable potential of an individual, whether it be an action, an end or something which can be changed or manipulated (thus not universal, eternal, or necessary). If deliberation is excluded from the sphere of *epistēmē* (as Aristotle so often states), what then is the means by which *epistēmē* (or insight) is reached or attained?

In chapter three of Book VII, Aristotle offers a clear description of how he presumes this to be:

Again, we may also view the cause as follows in **the way a natural scientist would.** The one opinion is universal, the other is concerned with particular facts, and here we come within the sphere of perception; when a single opinion results from the two, the soul must [...] affirm the conclusion. (1147a 25–27)

This is a description of syllogistic reasoning, which Aristotle spells out in Book VI (see above). The starting-points which ‘even knowledge of the universals presupposes’ are reached by induction. From

these starting-points the syllogism proceeds toward particulars. About these starting-points Aristotle explains:

Nor must we demand the cause in all matters alike; it is enough in some cases that the *fact* be well established, as in the case of the first principles; the fact is a primary thing or first principle. (1098b 1–3)

The syllogism, then, is the vehicle by means of which one attains *epistēmē*, or confirms whether a phenomenon can be accepted as such, or not. However, Aristotle includes one more essential ingredient to the equation. In chapter seven of Book II Aristotle not only demonstrates the use of the syllogism, but also demonstrates a firm grasp of the limitations of descriptions of social conduct:

We must, however, not only make this general statement, but also apply it to the individual facts. For among statements of conduct those which are more general apply more widely, but those which are particular are more true, since conduct has to do with individual cases, and our statements must harmonize with the facts in these cases. (1107a 27–32)

Thus, the statements which are made, and the conclusions which are reached by syllogistic reasoning, must also be confirmed by perception and observation. This is a form of falsification, or at least an attempt to verify the statements with the ‘facts’. This is also stated in chapter eight of Book I, as a warning, as one proceeds, that one should always consider the prevailing evidence:

We must consider it (the beginning), however, in light not only of our conclusion and our premises, but also of what is commonly said about it; for with a true view all the data harmonize, but with a false one the facts soon clash. (1098b 9–12)

This is a keen observation on Aristotle’s part, and one which may be used as a general guide in determining the correctness of a line of reasoning, and can be seen to play a role throughout Aristotle’s text. As such, he also refutes statements, where their facts do not harmonize with observation. One such example is in chapter two of Book VII, where Socrates’ statement, that no one errs willingly, and that there is no such thing as incontinence, is scrutinized:

Now this view plainly contradicts the observed facts, and we must inquire about what happens to such a man. (1145b 28–29)

This “harmonizes” with his initial statement that *epistēmē* is a state of capacity to **demonstrate**, involving the knowledge of starting-points and the syllogistic means to derive new statements, from the universal toward the particular, and in such a way, to attain and possess the truth of a situation or phenomenon.

## 5. ‘Practical wisdom’ (*phronēsis*)

### 5.1. *Phronēsis* in Book VI

In his approach to *phronēsis* Aristotle considers what type of person would generally be considered ‘practically wise’ so that his analysis and inferences may correspond to general observation. He begins with a general description:

Now it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of things conduce to health and strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general. (1140a 25–28)

Aristotle then uses an example of a person who, he considers, presents the typical characteristics of *phronēsis*:

[W]e think Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom, viz. because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general; we consider that those can do this who are good at managing households or states. (1140b 7–10)

Already, the reader has a mental picture of the type of person Aristotle considers to exemplify this state of the soul. But what is it about such a person that points specifically to *phronēsis*? Aristotle says that ‘we credit men with practical wisdom in some particular respect when they have calculated well with a view to some good end which is one of those that are not the object of any art’ (1140a 29–30), and he reasons that ‘practical wisdom is the quality of mind concerned with things just and noble and good for man’ (1143b 21–23). It becomes apparent that *phronēsis* is directly connected to the good of man, either in general or in a particular case. However, Aristotle clearly states that this is not in the sense as that of any *technē* (such as healing), but that it is a kind of action. In chapter five, Aristotle opposes action to production, or things done to things made.

For while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end. (1140b 6–7)

There is a fine line between action and production, which Aristotle pre-emptively introduced in chapter two in his dissection of the soul, into the practical and the contemplative intellect.<sup>23</sup>

[O]nly the intellect which aims at an end and is practical [moves something]; for this rules the productive intellect as well, [...] – only that which is **done** is that [an end in the unqualified sense]; for good action **is** an end and desire aims at this. (1139a 35 – 1139b 3)

---

<sup>23</sup> See Hughes (2001: 88 – 94) on the practical aspects of *phronēsis*.

Once again the metaphor of the archer is utilised by Aristotle to clarify what he means. Importantly, though, the crucial difference between production and action is that the former aims at producing something other than itself, whereas the latter does something for its own sake. And since the (good) action is done for its own sake, Aristotle deduces that it must be a virtue:

Plainly, then, practical wisdom is a virtue and not an art (which produces). There being two parts of the soul that can follow a course of reasoning (the scientific and the deliberative/calculative), it must be the virtue of one of the two, i.e. of that part which forms opinions; for opinion is about the variable and so is practical wisdom. (1140b 24–28)

Before he continues, Aristotle, as with the previous two states of the soul, reduces the defining characteristics of *phronēsis* to its principle:

Practical wisdom, then, must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods (1140b 20–21), [or] to the things that are good or bad for man (1140b 6).

A ‘reasoned and true capacity to act’ implies the use of reason to a degree and orientation which justifies it being called ‘true’, and the capability to initiate movement according to it (action). Aristotle sees a direct connection between the reasoning, the end at which the reasoning aims, and the impetus to initiate the action:

For the originating causes of the things that are done consist in the end at which they are aimed; [...] to see that for the sake of this or because of this he ought to choose and do whatever he chooses and does. (1140b 15–16)

It transpires that a crucial link in this sequence is choice. Aristotle determines:

The origin of action [...] is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. (1139a 32–33)

Thus, the desire to do (or achieve, or to have) something initiates reason to calculate possible routes of action to attain that end, and when a (seemingly) suitable one presents itself a choice is made, which may lead to action.

This is why choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state; for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character. (1139a 32–34)

That a good and proper choice must involve the intellect seems comprehensible enough, but, why the moral state or character are so important, is not yet clear. Also, the intellectual process was circumscribed above as the ‘calculation of possible routes of action’, which Aristotle refers to as ‘deliberation’. It may now become somewhat clearer what Aristotle means by his description of deliberation, which remained somewhat awkward in chapter four of this study.

Now no one deliberates about things that are invariable, nor about things that it is impossible for him to do. (1140a 33)

Deliberation is the intellectual process by which reason determines which of various possible actions to do in pursuit of a specific end, and how to do these. Deliberation culminates in a choice, which Aristotle contends, is the impetus of action. This still does not clarify the role of the moral state or character in this process. However, in chapter thirteen Aristotle states:

[T]he choice will not be right without practical wisdom any more than without (moral) virtue; for the one determines the end and the other makes us do the things that lead to the end. (1145a 3–6)

Aristotle, however, has more to say about deliberation. It seems that the Greek term was either ambiguous, or very general, or not a well known term. This turns out to our advantage, because he takes great care to describe what he means by it. He approaches the concept carefully, almost feeling his way forward:

But again excellence in deliberation involves reasoning. The remaining alternative, then, is that it is *correctness of thinking*; for this is not yet assertion, since, while even opinion is not inquiry but has reached the stage of assertion, the man who is deliberating, whether he does so well or ill, **is searching for something and calculating**. (1142b 13–15)

This ‘correctness of thinking’ has a moral as well as a practical element. At the beginning of this chapter it was stated that *phronēsis* is concerned with what is good for man. That Aristotle also includes this in his conception of deliberation becomes clear in chapter seven of Book VI:

The man who is without qualification good at deliberating is the man who is capable of aiming in accordance with calculation at the **best for man** of things attainable by action. (1141b 13–14)

And once again Aristotle emphasises the close connection between deliberation and *phronēsis*:

Practical wisdom on the other hand is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate; for we say that this is above all the work of the man with practical wisdom, to deliberate well, but no one deliberates about things invariable, nor about things which have not an end, and that [is] a good that can be brought about by action. (1141b 7–12)

Thus, deliberation is always a focused calculation about such things as can be achieved or attained, and which have, in general or in particular, a possible contribution to the good for man. Deliberation is the intellectual tool of *phronēsis*. Aristotle realises that the intellectual calculative ability towards ends is not limited to **good** ends. However, because he considers ‘deliberation’ to be so fundamentally a part of *phronēsis*, he imposes a restriction on deliberation in its orientation to ends. Aristotle seems to feel that these **must** be good. To solve the dilemma, he offers the following ‘sub-definition’:

There is a faculty which is called **cleverness**; and this is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it. Now if the mark be noble, the cleverness is laudable, but if the mark be bad, the cleverness is mere smartness (which is why the clever get called both ‘wise’ and ‘smart’). Practical wisdom is not the faculty, but it does not exist without this faculty. (1144a 24–28)

Thus, the actual intellectual ability to calculate the means to achieve an end (**any** end), Aristotle defines as ‘cleverness’. Deliberation is then, presumably, the case of cleverness aimed at a noble end, and thus, laudable. Considering the earlier statement, that *phronēsis* is concerned with what is ‘good and expedient’ for a man, and for ‘the good life (*eudaimonia*) in general’, it is not surprising that Aristotle is convinced that ‘it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue’ (1144b 30–32), or that ‘it is impossible to be practically wise without being good’ (1144a 36). So, if *phronēsis* considers the realisation of the achievable good for man, then deliberation, in a narrower sense, is the intellectual ability to calculate by what means this good may be achieved. Hence, Aristotle argues:

If, then, it is characteristic of men of practical wisdom to have deliberated well, excellence in deliberation will be correctness with regard to what conduces to the end of which practical wisdom is the true apprehension. (1142b 31–34)

This may seem like circular reasoning, but Aristotle really only demonstrates the interconnectedness of these two – that the one cannot be without the other.

The passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter states that *phronēsis* can be recognised in a man who is ‘able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, **not in some particular respect**, e.g. about what sorts of things conduce to health and strength, **but** about what sorts of things conduce to the good life **in general**.’ Yet, clearly, to deliberate about achievable means of attaining achievable ends combines both, the general direction of the good, but especially the **particular** steps to get there. That Aristotle recognised this is evident in the following:

Nor is practical wisdom concerned with universals **only** – it must also recognise the particulars; for it is practical, and practice is concerned with **particulars**.  
(1141b 14–16)

And he states it once again, in an effort to differentiate it from *epistēmē*, which is concerned with universals:

That practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge is evident; for it is, as has been said, concerned with the **ultimate particular fact**, since the thing to be done is of this nature. (1142a 23–24)

Evidently, there is a misunderstanding here. Either Aristotle contradicted himself, or some subtleties of the Greek text, which might have expressed a subtle difference between two cases, have been lost in the English translation, turning it into a contradiction. That Aristotle intended both, the universal and the particular, to be understood as part of the concern of *phronēsis* is evident from the discussions above. However, this is reaffirmed in another context. In chapter seven, Aristotle discusses another aspect of this same problem. *Phronēsis* consists of the ability to identify both, an end, and the means toward it, which in its turn requires both, the proper knowledge about these things, and the experience to deliberate well in such matters. Essentially, this is also a case of universals (the knowledge) and particulars (the experience). And so, Aristotle reasons:

[W]hile young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The cause is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience, but a young man has no experience, for it is length of time that gives experience. (1142a 12–15)

Once again Aristotle's emphasis on education is evident. However, this is not the education typically found at such institutions as schools, but is more akin to the experience gathered through practical training, more, in fact, like *technē*. Aristotle emphasises this even more:

Now practical wisdom is concerned with action; and therefore one should have both forms of it, or the latter (experience) in preference to the former (knowledge). (1141b 21–23)

The role of experience transpires to be substantially more important than initially observed, and it is for precisely this reason that the role of moral virtue is so important. Moral virtue has a much stronger link to behaviour and the actions of man. The importance is emphasised by Aristotle almost repeating himself in chapter twelve:

Again, the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtue; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means. (1144a 7–9)

It may be useful to recapitulate the main points of *phronēsis*; it is a state of the soul which deliberates, it is concerned with the good for man, as an individual and in general, it is involved with choices, with action and with behaviour, it is in constant consultation with moral virtue, and it requires knowledge and experience. It is not a *technē*, because it does not produce something, but focuses on action – unless, of course, the action results in something other than itself. If one deliberates about an end and about the means to achieve it, and proceeds to act in accordance with this deliberation toward this end, there is a sense of purpose to this entire process which will, if the end is in accordance with moral virtue (as it must be, if it is *phronēsis*), result in the good for man, either in a particular case, or in more

general circumstances. Aristotle's distinction between *technē* and *phronēsis* seems too weak at this point. The discussion on *technē* seemed to suggest that the political philosopher is essentially a 'technician' of the state, with the end of the goodness and happiness of the citizens in his scope, and applying his 'trade' to produce such an end. However, the close connection between Aristotle's use of a 'science' and an 'art' has also been addressed, with the suggestion that these "fields" have practical and theoretical aspects involved, and can be seen from different perspectives. *Phronēsis* seems to incorporate aspects of both of these, with perhaps a little more weight on the side of experience and practical application. However, Aristotle also makes the connection to the political philosopher, and some of his comments may shed some light on these difficulties.

Political wisdom and practical wisdom are the same state of mind, but their essence is not the same. Of the wisdom concerned with the city, the practical wisdom which plays a controlling part is legislative wisdom, while that which is related to this as particulars to their universals is known by the general name 'political wisdom'; (1141b 23–25)

Thus, legislative wisdom is a delimited form of political wisdom (as a particular to its universal), and political wisdom is a specialised form of *phronēsis*, and these use the same intellectual 'tools', but they are focused on the city, or the citizens. That this is seen, in part, as a *technē* is evident, where Aristotle continues (from the previous citation):

[T]his has to do with action and deliberation, for a decree is a thing to be carried out in the form of an individual act. This is why the exponents of this **art** are alone said to 'take part in politics'; for these alone 'do things' as manual labourers 'do things'. (1141b 26–28)

This is an example of the dual nature of such a "field", where the 'political philosopher' partakes in *phronēsis* to deliberate about legislation, and the 'political labourer' carries out the decrees in 'the form of an individual act'. As mentioned before, however, this is just one form in which *phronēsis* reveals itself (or is applied). Its most common subject is still the individual himself, and presumably, this is where the experience and the wisdom all begin.

Practical wisdom also is identified especially with that form of it which is concerned with a man himself – with the individual; and this is known by the general name 'practical wisdom'; of the other kinds one is called household management, another legislation, the third politics, and of the latter one part is called deliberative and the other judicial. (1141b 29–33)

By the amount of information on *phronēsis* (in the above discussion) it becomes clear that this is a major exponent of Book VI. An investigation of further comments about *phronēsis* will now follow, but again, it is in Book VI where Aristotle's main discussion thereof lies. Thus, it is not surprising that he finishes off with references to the beginning of Book VI, which he had introduced as follows:

Since we have previously said that one ought to choose that which is intermediate, not the excess nor the defect, and that the intermediate is determined by **the dictates of the right rule**, let us discuss the nature of these dictates. (1138b 17–20)

The discussion of the intellectual states of the soul is essentially a directory of determining the right rule, the intermediate of, or in, a situation, and to establish the nature of the intellectual counterpart to the moral virtues which Aristotle discussed in the previous part of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In chapter thirteen Aristotle refers back to this when he states:

[N]ow the right rule is that which is in accordance with practical wisdom. (1144b 22)

As a statement on its own, this is empty of any helpful information. But, following the discussion of Book VI, implying with ‘in accordance with practical wisdom’ the whole discussion above, this will lead one to an apprehension of the ‘right rule’. Further comments of, and about, *phronēsis* throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* will now be investigated.

## 5.2. *Phronēsis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

It will become evident that some passages will be repeatedly used in quotations, but with a different emphasis according to the context of each different chapter. This is due to the interconnectedness of the subject matter. As could be seen earlier, parts of *technē* and *epistēmē* play a role in the understanding and use of *phronēsis*, and this will become even more evident in the following discussion. Accordingly, what the following discussion presents about *phronēsis* should not be read separately from the previous two chapters, but specifically with those discussions in mind.

Another feature that can lead to some confusion is the close relation between the states of the soul and the actual field where such a state is realised. For example, *technē* is in fact the field in which such practical disciplines as medicine, architecture, or navigation, are practiced. But Aristotle also uses the term to refer to the state of the soul by which we recognise and implement information that is variable, changing, productive, and corresponds to the other characteristic features associated with *technē*. Thus, by practicing a *technē*, the state of the soul termed by Aristotle as ‘*technē*’ is utilised and implemented to facilitate the proper engagement of the soul, the body, and the object. This means that not only artists have the state of the soul called ‘*technē*’, and neither will they only have *technē* as the state of their soul, but, quite probably, they will possess all five states, just as everyone else does (in potential). This may seem like a trivial distinction to make at this point, but it is extremely important. The difficulty

comes in when either one can be meant, or the one is used to clarify the other, as was often done with *technē*. This distinction will be referred back to every so often.

Aristotle touches on various topics in his ethics, and to extract information connected to *phronēsis* (as is the case with the other states of the soul) it does not suffice only to look at passages where he explicitly mentions *phronēsis*. Certain themes which he binds to this state of the soul are discussed in various contexts, and these discussions lead to a greater understanding of the subject. In an attempt to clarify these discussions, these themes have been grouped<sup>24</sup> as follows – the close connection Aristotle makes between action and deliberation, the importance of virtues and noble activity in pursuit of being and doing good, the necessity Aristotle assigns to pleasure and happiness in this context, and finally, the responsibility Aristotle feels to pass on this information on the political and educational front. The following discussion will be guided by this thematic grouping.

### 5.2.1. Action and deliberation

Aristotle places much emphasis on the fact that deliberation is necessarily connected to action, and that thinking is only worth something if it is made real in, or through, the thinker. In Book II he says:

[F]or we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use [...], we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are produced, as we have said. (1103b 27–31)

It becomes clear that Aristotle does not philosophise about ethics as an exercise in theoretical contemplation. It is his sincere intention that his thoughts and discussions have direct applicable value, and to lead individuals in becoming better people and lead happier lives. This is emphasised explicitly somewhat further in the discussion:

It is well said, then, that it is **by doing just acts** that the just man is produced, and **by doing temperate acts** the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good. But most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former **will not be made well in soul** by such a course of philosophy. (1105b 8–18)

Thus, a philosophy that inquires about such things as virtue, goodness, happiness, and the purpose of, and for, man, must be one which combines its ideas with action, and the results of its success, or lack thereof, will be visible in the psychological well-being of the individual. In the introductory paragraph

---

<sup>24</sup> Depending on the focus of the study, other themes may obviously be found in the same text, and the grouping of these may look differently in another context.

of Book II Aristotle explains how it is that a treatment of these subjects is to be found in an ethical treatise, and what this has to do with moral and intellectual virtue.

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ēthikē*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ēthos* (habit). (1103a 14–18)

Thus, ethics is essentially about the formation of good habits, which lead to a good character, which leads to consistent and noble behaviour, and, according to Aristotle, leads to happiness. However, as he clearly stated, he does not only mean moral virtue, but intellectual virtue too. These virtues, he says, are mainly dependant on teaching and experience, and are arguably also a form of habit, and have to be practiced.

In Book III Aristotle tries to show that virtuous action and noble deeds are not a fate assigned to some lucky few, and withheld from the masses. They are, in fact, a subject of choice:

Now if it is in our power to do noble or base acts, and likewise in our power not to do them, and this was what being good or bad meant, then it is in our power to be virtuous or vicious. (1113b 11–13)

Meticulously, Aristotle tries to clarify every step he takes, every point he makes.

[B]ut if a thing seems possible we try to do it. By ‘possible’ things I mean things that might be brought about by our own efforts. (1112b 25–27)

And, how is it that those things that are possible to man are identified? It is by deliberation:

It seems then that man is a moving principle of actions; now **deliberation** is about the things to be **done** by the agent himself, and actions are for the sake of things other than themselves. (1112b 31–33)

And in chapter five of Book III Aristotle ties together deliberation, action, choice, and virtues.

The end, then, being what we wish for, the means what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning means must be according to choice and voluntary. Now the exercise of the virtues is concerned with means. Therefore virtue is in our own power, and so too vice. (1113b 2–7)

In other words, if one has a clear picture in mind of what one wants (the end wished for), one may calculate and think about the different routes to achieve this, and the actions toward this end should ideally be in line with the route chosen to get there. One’s behaviour toward this end (thus, during the action, “on” the route) is the realisation of virtuous or vicious<sup>25</sup> intent in action, and is a subject of

---

<sup>25</sup> ‘Vicious’ seems somewhat extreme in this case. The traditional opposite of virtue is vice, and ‘vicious’ is intended as the adjective of the opposite of virtue, and not primarily in the modern sense of the word.

choice. Thus, to be virtuous or vicious comes down to choice. Of course, this seems clear enough in a theoretical situation, but in reality this is not always so straight forward. And for this reason Aristotle persists to emphasise the importance of thinking about the means and ends. He describes those who do this well:

They assume the end and consider how and by what means it is to be attained; and if it seems to be produced by several means they consider by which it is most easily and best produced, while if it is by one only they consider how it will be achieved and by what means *this* will be achieved, till they come to the first cause, which in the order of discovery is last. (1112b 15–19)

By identifying the end, what it is they wish for, they reroute each step backwards in a line of optimal steps until they arrive at themselves at that time. They are the first cause of their actions which have now been plotted on a route toward a specific goal. There are clear parallels to the modes of functioning which Aristotle described of *epistēmē*, concerning first principles and the syllogistic reasoning towards particulars. However, clearly it is not always that easily done. By merely seeing an ideal route towards an end (which may be hard enough as it is), one certainly has not yet arrived there – just as, by merely looking at a map of a countryside, one has not yet walked across it. Aristotle addresses this in Book VII in a somewhat lengthy discussion, in which he explicitly mentions the man of practical wisdom.

Nor can the same man have practical wisdom and be incontinent<sup>26</sup>; for it has been shown that a man is at the same time practically wise, and good in respect of character. Further, a man has practical wisdom **not by knowing only but by being able to act**; but the incontinent man is unable to act – there is, however, nothing to prevent a *clever* man from being incontinent; this is why it is sometimes actually thought that some people have practical wisdom but are incontinent; viz. because cleverness and practical wisdom differ in the way we have described in our first discussions, and are near together in respect of their reasoning, but differ in respect of their purpose – not yet is the incontinent man like the man who knows and is contemplating a truth, but like the man who is asleep or drunk. And thus the incontinent man is like a city which passes all the right decrees and has good laws, but makes no use of them. (1152a 8–22)

Thus, a man of practical wisdom, of *phronēsis*, is necessarily continent, in the Aristotelian sense, with a prudent end in sight and the will power to act towards it. A ‘clever’ man may have any number of ends in sight (which may be incidentally good) but does not always have the determination to follow through with his plans, and in which case he would be incontinent. Aristotle’s emphasis on the ability to act

---

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle refers to continent and incontinent men in relation to their ability to act according to their will. He makes several distinctions concerning the details of this idea. Generally, and sufficient in this context, the continent man acts according to his will, and the incontinent man wills something, but is distracted from his course of action by e.g. something more interesting, because it is too hard, or any other reason short of physically preventing him from acting as planned.

according to reason and the deliberated means cannot be overemphasised. In Book I he uses a simile to express the importance of this relationship.

And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned **but those who compete** (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life. (1099a 3–6)

Aristotle makes it very clear that it is not enough to have something potentially, it must be realised through action. This also means that it is not enough merely to think about something, an action must follow these thoughts, if they are to have any value. And what type of value does Aristotle presume these would, or should, have? Generally, as can be seen in the previous passage, ‘the noble and good things in life’.

### 5.2.2. Virtues and noble activity in pursuit of being and doing good

With the very first lines of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle touches on one of the essential questions concerning the philosopher, and the ethics in general.

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to **aim at some good**; and for this reason **the good** has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. (1094a 1–3)

“The good” plays a central role in the ethics, because it is central to some elemental questions the *Nicomachean Ethics* tries to address, such as: What does it mean to be good? What is “goodness”? Can “goodness” be achieved, shared, measured, or even described? Plato located the “good” in the sphere of Ideas, inaccessible to anyone and far beyond the reach of the average human. Aristotle struggles with this conception. Clearly, he argues, goodness is something that plays a role in everyday life; work, behaviour, art, food, laws, music, and all sorts of things are being called ‘good’. Either, this use of the word has nothing to do with what the “good” is, or there is a serious misunderstanding in society. Aristotle approaches this problem cautiously with the lines quoted above. After discussing some of the general problems he perceives in this regard, he declares his solution for the time being:

And similarly with regard to the Idea; even if there is some one good which is universally predictable of goods or is capable of separate and independent existence, clearly it could not be achieved or attained by man; **but we are now seeking something attainable**. (1096b 33–35)

A “good” which is beyond the reach of humans may be an interesting philosophical subject of contemplation but it is of no use for the inquirer who seeks a good life, the upstanding man who tries to improve on himself, or the real-philosopher who tries to become a better person. This is another instance where Aristotle refuses to accept theory for the sake of itself, but seeks the applicable value of theory in reality, much like his emphasis on the close relation between deliberation and action. The

good he is seeking is a good in relation to man, or a good for man. Aristotle sees a close connection between the good of man and the function of man (to use his reason), good action by man (virtuous activity), and man's happiness as a result of practising "goodness" in these spheres of life.

The answer to the question we are asking is plain also from the definition of happiness; for it has been said to be a virtuous activity of soul, of a certain kind. Of the **remaining goods**, some must necessarily pre-exist as conditions of happiness, and others are naturally co-operative and useful as instruments. (1099b 25–28)

It transpires from this extract that some goods lead toward happiness (those that pre-exist), while others continue in parallel to happiness, all the while that happiness is a form of 'activity of the soul'. It seems then that happiness is a symptom of the combination of these goods and the corresponding activity of the soul. Aristotle continues:

With those who identify happiness with virtue or some one virtue our account is in harmony; **for to virtue belongs virtuous activity**. For the state of the mind may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, **but the activity cannot**; for one who has the activity will of necessity be acting, and acting well. (1098b 30 – 1099a 3)

Thus, a man may accidentally be happy in certain situations, without playing an active role in achieving this or maintaining this state, as in someone who is asleep. Similarly, one may have virtuous thoughts about many things, but as long as these thoughts do not proceed into action, they are worth no more than the happy dreams of a sleeping person. But, if there is something one can do to achieve the state of happiness, maintain it, and improve the chances of others to share in it as well, Aristotle persists that one must **engage** in virtuous activity too.

[F]or the happy man lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action. (1098b 20–22)

It seems obvious enough that happiness spreads, if it is a happiness which takes pleasure in noble deeds and good action, and not in the demise of others. In fact, Aristotle argues just that in Book IX, where he considers what would happen if everybody were to act virtuously to everyone else.

[I]f *all* were to strive towards what is noble and strain every nerve to do the noblest deeds, everything would be as it should be for the common weal, and everyone would secure for himself the goods that are greatest, since virtue is the greatest of goods. (1169a 29–33)

Aristotle is too much of a realist to expect such a situation to come about. However, he insists that this would benefit everyone. And this is not the benefit of sacrifice, of putting another's happiness above one's own, but the realisation that no one can be truly happy at the expense of someone else. Aristotle imagines that the good man will have employed his reason to choose ends, will desire these for he

realises that they are good, and will be glad to pursue them and rejoice in the activities that lead towards these ends.

For his opinions are harmonious, and he desires the same things with all his soul; and therefore he wishes for himself what is good and what seems so, **and does it** (for it is characteristic of the good man to work out the good), and does so **for his own sake**. (1166a 13–16)

And because it is good for his own sake, and because the good man works out what is, in deed, good (for, else, he would not be called a good man, so Aristotle), his desires and actions will also benefit others.

Therefore the good man should be a lover of self (for he will both himself profit by doing noble acts, and will benefit his fellows). (1169a 12–13)

It is not only for the sake of goodness, of who benefits, or even of the nobility, but virtuous activity, says Aristotle, is also pleasant – and leads to happiness (not merely proper-ness).

If this is so virtuous actions must be in themselves pleasant. But they are also *good* and *noble*, and have each of these attributes in the highest degree, since the good man judges well about these attributes; his judgement is such as we have described. Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world. (1099a 20–25)

These attributes and activities are, as was stated further above, ‘naturally co-operative’, and certainly not mutually exclusive. Neither are the happiness and virtuous activity of an individual. In Book IX Aristotle describes the role and place of friendship between ‘good men’:

Therefore, since each of these characteristics belong to the good man in relation to himself, and he is related to his friend as to himself (for his friend is another self), friendship too is thought to be one of these attributes [of happiness], and those who have these attributes to be friends. (1166a 29–33)

Increasingly, it becomes evident that Aristotle regards happiness and virtuous activity as a multifaceted, multidimensional process, and not a state of singularity. This is stated explicitly here because later in the study it will seem that Aristotle hints at quite the contrary. How, and if, these two contentions may be reconciled, will be investigated later. However, during the discussions on philosophical wisdom (*sophia*) and intuitive reason (*nous*), references will be made to this point. Now, however, the role of happiness and pleasure, which already formed part of the current discussion, will be concentrated on in connection with *phronēsis*.

### 5.2.3. The role of pleasure and happiness

If one considers happiness, Aristotle indicates, one must consider the role of pleasure. What kind of happiness can one conceive of that does not include some form of pleasure? Pleasure, however, can

easily be misunderstood and, if not in its context, can lead to ambiguity. That this is not merely so in modern English, and that it was prone to the same ambiguity in the Greek, is attested by Aristotle's effort to clarify what kind of pleasure he intended to be understood in his argument. Once again he uses those people he felt showed mastery in *phronēsis*:

[B]ut the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. Their life, therefore, has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure in itself. (1099a 12–16)

The phrase 'pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm' seems to address a phenomenon that is remarkably familiar. If something can only be enjoyed when a superficial 'charm' has been stuck on, the pleasure derived from it may be as superficial. Can this lead to real happiness? It is astonishing how relevant Aristotle's comments are to modern society, where almost every commercial article or product, it seems, is clothed in a sheet of shiny, attractive and overpowering exterior to instantly gratify the consumer, whether it is a product of technology, a new sports car presented by a scarcely clothed beauty, or a food product with overwhelming and exotic flavours. It is hard to imagine how Aristotle's audience, and its society, could have been subject to similarly sensational distractions in the absence of the "flashy" products of the modern world. However, Aristotle addresses some universal human characteristics which had apparently been a part of society as much then as they are now. It is the feebleness with which people, as individuals and as groups, decide between instant gratification of their senses by well-employed distractions, and naturally healthy stimulation with subtler qualities. In the previous quotation Aristotle reasons that 'the lovers of what is noble' also love what is naturally good and healthy, which is not clothed with a distracting exterior or 'adventitious charm'. Their life 'has its pleasure in itself'. In Book X Aristotle ties this up with virtue, practical wisdom and happiness:

Practical wisdom, too, is linked to virtue of character, and this to practical wisdom, since the principles of practical wisdom are in accordance with the moral virtues and rightness in morals is in accordance with practical wisdom. (1178a 16–18)

This implies that *phronēsis* is implicitly tied up with the moral virtues, and these follow the logical dictates of goodness and righteousness which *phronēsis* recognises in its intellectual capacity of deliberation about the means towards good ends. The one does not exist without the other. And Aristotle continues:

Being connected with the passions also, the moral virtues must belong to our composite nature; and the virtues of our composite nature are human; so, therefore, are the life and the happiness which correspond to these. (1178a 18–21)

Aristotle shows an awareness that the ‘passions’ form part of the human make-up, and that the happiness he speaks of must take account of these, incorporate them, if it is to be worth anything. A morality that denies the ‘passions’ their natural place denies the composite human nature, and is self-negating. Aristotle also emphasises that the virtues he describes are not some philosophical concept or an abstract, far-removed idea – he is investigating **human** virtues and happiness, which must be attainable. This also becomes clear in the following abstract taken from Book I:

But clearly the virtue we must study is human virtue; for the good we were seeking was human good and the happiness human happiness. By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of the soul. (1102a 12–17)

Aristotle refers to his initial distinction of function, which assigns to humans the continuous use of reason. Thus, human virtue, human goodness and human happiness must be connected to the use of reason, or the ‘virtue of the soul’. The ‘passions’ are incorporated by the moral virtues, which, as part of the ‘human composite nature’ must be in ‘accordance with the principles of practical wisdom’, and so are part of ‘human happiness’, as Aristotle regards it. Once again Aristotle emphasises the importance of friendship in the closing paragraph of Book IX:

If, then, being is in itself desirable for the supremely happy man (since it is by its nature good and pleasant), and that of his friend is very much the same, a friend will be one of the things that are desirable. (1170b 14–17)

The friendship that Aristotle describes here is not a relationship of dependence, but one of two people who are independently happy, taking pleasure in their own (noble) activities, who recognise a common ground in their respective virtuous conduct and self-sufficient happiness, and relate to each other in this sense. Aristotle also muses how they might share philosophical insights and engage in philosophical conversation. However, it is this knowledge, this awareness, that one is doing what one would want to, and conducting oneself in such a way as one would like, were one to sit down and really think about it for some time, that Aristotle contends must be happiness.

#### 5.2.4. The role of education and politics

In a short review of this chapter some key aspects stand out as definitive of *phronēsis* on the one hand, but also of the good man and good life, as Aristotle regards them, on the other. The first passage quoted from Book VI in this chapter indicates the essential starting point Aristotle departs from to discuss *phronēsis*.

Now it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to **deliberate well** about what is **good and expedient for himself**, [...] [and] about what sorts of things conduce to the **good life in general**. (1140a 25–28)

It was shown that Aristotle regards imperative in this context that deliberation about good ends, the ability to reason about morally sound pursuits, and the virtuous action in pursuit of these ends, and also for the sake of itself, lead to a cohesive social conduct which is modelled on rational and practical principles. A society based on such conduct provides the best potential for individual and societal happiness. It is essentially the state of the soul *phronēsis* which recognises these principles and is operative in engaging in the action according to these. This state of the soul, and its cohesive intermediary role between the moral and intellectual virtues, is best formed and prepared through habits and teaching, beginning at a young age. By internalising these principles at a young age, Aristotle reasons, it will not be difficult to act according to them throughout one's life. However, these should be practised and exercised continually, so that they may remain the active ingredients in the society, but also, says Aristotle, because they provide the best possible conditions for happiness, and are ingredients in the good life, or *eudaimonia*.

However, because it is hard work to continually practise these, and because often enough the value and benefits of these principles are not grasped intellectually and consciously internalised, there needs to be a system in place which protects these principles and assists the society in preserving them. This is attained through the laws. Thus, a system of education which internalises habits of conduct and the principles of moral and intellectual virtues, together with legislation which upholds and protects these, provides an ideal stage for a stable and happy society. An understanding of these principles is provided by a firm grasp of ethics, and the responsibility to draw up legislation which supports such a system lies with political science. In chapter nine of Book X Aristotle argues:

But it is difficult to get from youth up a right training for virtue if one has not been brought up under right laws; for to live temperately and hardily is not pleasant to most people, especially when they are young. For this reason their nurture and occupation should be fixed by law; for they will not be painful when they have become customary. But it is surely not enough that when they are young they should get the right nurture and attention; since they must, even when they are grown up, practice and be habituated to them, we shall need laws for this as well, and generally speaking to cover the whole of life; for most people obey necessity rather than argument, and punishments rather than the sense of what is noble.  
(1179b 31 – 1180a 4)

Aristotle shows that he is not merely an idealist who speculates about an ideal society. Recognising the ideal conditions for a community only provides the end at which he aims. He must then deliberate about practical means of (at least) moving in that direction, and reconcile the observations from reality with the aspirations of his theory. This is *phronēsis* in action demonstrated by Aristotle himself.

Aristotle portrays a close connection between the nurturing duty of education and the conserving duty of the laws. For these two to optimally support each other it is necessary that their principles are aligned. As the governing body then, it is the responsibility of the legislature to align and fix the outlines for education. And so, the education of the young becomes, in Aristotle's view, the responsibility of the state, and not merely that of the family head, the father.

[I]f the man who is to be good must be well trained and habituated, and go on to spend his time in worthy occupations and neither willingly nor unwillingly do bad actions, and if this can be brought about if men live in accordance with a sort of reason and right order, provided this has force, – if this be so, the paternal command indeed has not the required force or compulsive power [...], but the law *has* compulsive power, while it is at the same time a rule proceeding from a sort of practical wisdom and reason. And while people hate *men* who oppose their impulses, even if they oppose them rightly, the law in its ordaining of what is good is not burdensome. (1180a 14–24)

The laws, then, because they have more 'compulsive power' help both, those who rule and those who are ruled. However, it is important that they are based on sound rational principles, because such a basis enhances their persuasive power. Principles, as has been seen above, in accordance with practical wisdom, *phronēsis*. This places a large responsibility on the legislators, as Aristotle reaffirms in the following passage:

This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one. (1103b 2–6)

The sentiments here echo those of the discussion of *phronēsis* in Book VI (the first half of this chapter), where the close connection between *phronēsis* and politics and legislation was also emphasised. As *technē* plays a definitive role in the work of an artist or a doctor, *epistēmē* is evident in the classroom and education, so the role of *phronēsis* is especially vivid in the statesman. In very practical terms it relieves him of burdensome efforts to manage unnecessary squabbles.

It would seem from what has been said that he can do this (governing) better if he makes himself capable of legislating. For public control is plainly effected by laws, and good control by good laws. (1180a 32–34)

In more holistic terms, according to Aristotle, by legislating good laws, the statesman provides the platform for a society to "be good". By having habituated and internalised the principles of *phronēsis*, by engaging in noble and virtuous activity and behaviour to one another, and by deriving pleasure from these activities, such a society could be easily governed, and would be generally happy and prosperous.

It is hard not to overlook the idealism in this portrayal. And yet, what Aristotle does is to set up a mark at which the legislator (presumably in his audience) can aim, for ...

Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? (1094a 24–25)

## 6. ‘Philosophic wisdom’ (*sophia*)

### 6.1. *Sophia* in Book VI

After reading the chapter on *phronēsis*, one is left with the strong impression that the discussion on human good and virtue has reached its conclusion. *Phronēsis* seems to embody the best of human behaviour and intellectual ability, habitually deliberating about the best course of action to achieve good ends, for one self and for the community, and to **follow** this course, to **do** what one had planned. This, says Aristotle, is not only beneficial for one’s own life, and for the community’s, but is also the best route towards a life of enduring happiness. *Phronēsis* is (or should be) involved in every aspect of life, ranging from education and upbringing to legislation and politics (or adult social life), it is active in those who govern and should be active in those who are governed, for the best possible outcome. However, although Aristotle considers *phronēsis* an intrinsic element of the well governed society, being happy as a community and as individuals, he cannot accept this to be the final end of life. An intellectual pursuit which culminates in the perpetual focus on itself lacks horizon and perspective. Once *phronēsis* has reached a stage of maturity in a society, is its function really only to nurture itself?

Aristotle contends that a life of noble activity and the habituated practicing of virtues, the pursuit of knowledge and insight and the proficiency in deliberation, must lead to an intellectual maturity which allows one to blend out from the constantly changing particulars and regard the greater things in life, the unchanging and eternal things. This is generally considered to be wisdom, and Aristotle aptly includes this in the five states of the soul by which one attains truth. In his dissection of the intellectual, rational soul in chapters one and two of Book VI, Aristotle places *sophia* in the category which ‘grasps a rule or rational principle’, ‘by which we contemplate the kind of things whose originative causes are **invariable**’, and falls on the side of the ‘scientific’ part of the soul. Aristotle determines in chapter two:

[O]f the intellect which is contemplative, not practical nor productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual). (1139a 27–29)

Thus, *sophia* is concerned with grasping rational principles and focuses on the unchanging, invariable, eternal things. Its affinity to the ‘scientific’ part of the soul is initially only clear as the opposite of the ‘calculative and deliberative’ part, which it is clearly not. In fact, Aristotle almost becomes guilty of glancing over *sophia* in Book VI, with giving relatively little clarification on what he understands under this state of the soul. Does he struggle with clarifying it further himself? Or does he assume that ‘philosophic wisdom’ at least, should be clear enough to his audience? None the less, there are some

salient features which Aristotle discusses in connection with *sophia* which may aid in a clearer understanding of this all important state of the soul. Once again Aristotle uses examples of famous people he considers to have shown prominent features of *sophia*:

This is why we say Anaxagoras, Thales, and men like them have philosophic but not practical wisdom, when we see them ignorant of what is to their own advantage, and why we say that they know things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult, and divine, but useless; viz. because it is not human goods that they seek. (1141b 3–7)

Aristotle uses ‘practical wisdom’ (*phronēsis*) to show what ‘philosophic wisdom’ (*sophia*) is **not**. However, he also says that *sophia* is about knowing things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult and divine, and that it does not concern itself with practical things for human advantage or goods. This seems rather odd, as one would expect wisdom to entail knowledge of the good, and naturally also of that which is good for man. Aristotle has more to say on the matter, though, and approaches its description carefully, perhaps because it eludes a precise definition.

Now if what is healthy or good is different for men and for fishes, but what is white or straight is always the same, any one would say that what is wise is the same but what is practically wise is different; for it is to that which observes well the various matters concerning itself that one ascribes practical wisdom, and it is to this that one will entrust such matters. (1141a 22–26)

*Phronēsis*, as was also shown in the previous chapter, concerns itself with the good for man, and as Aristotle says here, ‘it is to this that one will entrust such matters’. Consequently, it is **not** to *sophia* that such matters are entrusted, as was also evident from the example of Thales and Anaxagoras. However, the good that Aristotle discusses here, which is ‘different for men and for fishes’ is not an overarching good, but one **of** particulars **for** particulars. *Sophia*, Aristotle says, is concerned with things that are always the same, such as whiteness or straightness. This train of thought is continued in the following:

It is evident also that philosophic wisdom and the art of politics cannot be the same; for if the state of mind concerned with a man’s own interests is to be called philosophic wisdom, there will be many philosophic wisdoms; there will not be one concerned with the good of all animals (any more than there is one art of medicine for all existing things), but a different philosophic wisdom about the good of each species. (1141a 28–33)

The art of politics, then, is concerned with the good of man in relation to his changing and volatile interests, depending on the particular situation. However, Aristotle seems to imply that there is a good ‘for all animals’, thus overarching the particulars of barriers between species, and which is unconcerned with the particular advantages of the one or the other. But surely, should not any good

which is good for all the species, be particularly good for man? Is not man, with his reason which Aristotle so highly regards, the worthiest recipient of such a good? Aristotle counters:

But if the argument be that man is the best of the animals, this makes no difference; for there are other things much more divine in their nature even than man, e.g., most conspicuously, the bodies of which the heavens are framed. From what has been said it is plain, then, that philosophic wisdom is scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature.

*Sophia*, then, concerns itself with such divine matters as the heavenly bodies. This should not be mistaken for astronomy or astrology<sup>27</sup>, which Aristotle knew well enough, but points to the consistency with which these bodies move, year after year, which had made a profound impression on the Greeks, as on other ancient cultures. Aristotle becomes clearer with his description that ‘philosophic wisdom is scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason’. The fuller meaning of this statement will become clearer during the following chapter of this study, when *nous* (‘intuitive reason’) is investigated more closely. However, already having a fuller understanding of what Aristotle means with ‘scientific knowledge’, this statement can be taken at face value, for the time being. Quite clearly, however, Aristotle states that one state of the soul is essentially a combination of two others. The significance of this will also become apparent further down.

*Epistēmē* was shown to concern itself with the demonstration of things known, or learnt, and with the syllogism which follows from first principles. It is also concerned with the invariable and with universals. This fits neatly with what has already been said about *sophia*. That Aristotle has a high regard for *sophia* becomes very clear in the following extract:

Therefore wisdom must plainly be the most finished of the forms of knowledge. It follows that the wise man must not only know what follows from the first principles, but must also possess truth about the first principles. Therefore wisdom must be intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge – scientific knowledge of the highest objects which has received as it were its proper completion. (1141a 16–19)

It is implied here that one may learn about such things as first principles, for which one employs one’s intellectual faculty *epistēmē* (to ‘know what follows from first principles’). However, as this faculty matures, and as the knowledge of first principles changes from purely learnt to really understood, *epistēmē* and *nous* develop into *sophia*, wisdom. The triangular link between these three is once again emphasised, and so is the subject matter of *epistēmē*. Apparently, with the maturity of the state of the soul (towards ‘its proper completion’) comes the change of simply ‘scientific’ knowledge to ‘scientific

---

<sup>27</sup> Although these may obviously share some of the same interests as *sophia*.

knowledge of the highest goods'. In chapter eight Aristotle discusses the intellectual maturity in a similar context.

[I]ndeed one might ask this question too, why a boy may become a mathematician, but not a philosopher or a physicist. Is it because the objects of mathematics exist by abstraction, while the first principles of these other subjects come from experience, and because young men have no conviction about the latter but merely use the proper language, while the essence of mathematical objects is plain enough to them.  
(1142a 15–19)

Mathematics, in this case, is an example of a neatly worked out subject for which it is necessary to study the proper language and, probably, theorems.<sup>28</sup> The philosopher, says Aristotle, must gather experience about the first principles and develop a conviction about them, so that his knowledge will not be based merely on repeating what he learnt from someone else, but he will be able to scrutinise the validity of information on his own. It is this maturity that comes from experience that is essential in the proper development of *sophia*. Experience, however, was also vitally important for *phronēsis*. Somehow, these two seem to be so similar, that Aristotle keeps on specifying their **differences**. In Book VI each state of the soul seems to have one chapter set aside for it to focus on that state specifically. For *sophia* this is chapter seven. And yet, the ending of this chapter (which is familiar in part from chapter five, above) is rather strange.

Now practical wisdom is concerned with action; therefore one should have both forms of it (knowledge and experience) or the latter in preference to the former. **But here too there must be a controlling kind.** (1141b 21–22)

Now, for *phronēsis*, 'experience' is necessary for the application of the knowledge to particular situations. However, this cannot be the case for *sophia*, since it is not at all concerned with particulars. Does this 'controlling kind' from the above extract refer to *sophia*? In a chapter which discusses the characteristics of *sophia* specifically, only referring to other states to point out differences, it would be odd to end this chapter with a statement about *phronēsis*, unless this statement is used to clarify some specific point about *sophia*. Could *sophia* be the 'controlling kind' guiding *phronēsis*?

In chapter eleven Aristotle once again points at the developmental nature of *sophia*.

This is why these states are thought to be natural endowments – why, while no one is thought to be a philosopher by nature, people are thought to have by nature judgement, understanding, and intuitive reason. (1143b 6–7)

These 'natural endowments' are the intellectual characteristics of a person, similar to the behavioural and emotional character traits. As the natural character traits are not requisite for the formation of

---

<sup>28</sup> It is quite obviously not the sophisticated kind of mathematics which underlies modern university subjects in different fields of application and specialisation.

virtuous behaviour, but may influence the ease with which some behaviour types are acquired, so the intellectual ‘endowments’ are not necessary for the development of *sophia*, but are certainly helpful. The essential aspect for Aristotle is the early habituation of noble actions and virtuous behaviour. By adapting good habits early, Aristotle contends that it will be easier to behave in a noble and virtuous fashion, which promotes one’s chances of happiness, as these are ingredients in the happy life. Similarly, natural endowments of the intellect will have an influence on the development of the intellectual virtues, but the development itself is initiated and shaped by proper habits and practices. This is why education plays such a vital role in Aristotle’s ethics (‘habits’).

At the end of chapter two of Book VI, after dissecting the soul into its various parts, and discussing the work and function of these, Aristotle sets himself the task of finding the **virtue** of each (just before making the statement which this study investigates).

The work of both the intellectual parts (scientific and deliberative/calculative), then, is truth. Therefore the states that are most strictly those in respect of which each of these parts will reach truth are **the virtues of the two parts**. (1139b 11–13)

In this statement Aristotle presumes two parts of the soul, that the soul will ‘reach truth’ through either of these, and that there are two states most characteristic of these parts which can be considered their respective virtues. In chapter eleven Aristotle refers back to this statement, finally having clarified the states of the soul sufficiently enough (apparently) to show that these are the respective virtues.

We have stated, then, what practical and philosophic wisdom are, and with what each of them is concerned, and we have said that **each is a virtue of a different part of the soul**. (1143b 14–16)

Thus, *phronēsis* is the virtue of the ‘deliberative, calculative’ part of the soul, and *sophia* is the virtue of the ‘scientific’. This seems to suggest a hierarchical order of the intellectual states of the soul. This sense of superiority is increased when Aristotle discusses the relationship between these two virtues.

In chapter twelve of Book VI Aristotle undertakes a review of the intellectual states of the soul, more specifically though, about the two virtues. In true fashion Aristotle begins by inquiring about the function of these two, in this case expressed as their utility.

Difficulties might be raised as to the utility of these qualities of mind. For [...] philosophic wisdom will contemplate none of the things that will make a man happy (for it is not concerned with any coming into being), and though practical wisdom has *this* merit, for what purpose do we need it? (1143b 17–21)

It is encouraging that Aristotle asks this critical question. The full consequence of the discussions in Book VI seems a little elusive, and often merely hinted at, and it is precisely this question that prevails

at this stage of the book. And although *phronēsis* has been described reasonably well, *sophia* remains somewhat mysterious; it develops from the maturity of *epistēmē* and *nous*, is concerned with the highest objects or goods, and is the virtue of the ‘scientific’ part of the soul. All this is still somewhat vague, though. Aristotle answers as follows:

Now first let us say that in themselves these states must be worthy of choice because they are the virtues of the two parts of the soul respectively, even if neither of them **produce** anything. (1144a 1–2)

This argument sounds a little circular; however, as has been reasoned in the preceding part of Book VI, the intellectual states of the soul are responsible for recognising the ‘good’ in their respective fields of expertise, and thus would supposedly recognise these two states as the superior among them and consequently as their virtues. As that which is superior and virtuous, these states would then be desirable, not as a means to something else, but as the refined version of itself. However, Aristotle continues:

Secondly, they **do** produce something, not as the art of medicine produces health, however, but as health produces health; **so does philosophic wisdom produce happiness**; for, being a part of virtue entire, by being possessed and by actualising itself it makes a man happy. (1144a 3–5)

There are three important aspects in this excerpt. One, Aristotle’s main thesis throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* is that happiness is the final end, that at which all actions and efforts aim and in which they find their completion. So, also, does *sophia*, which would be meaningless if it would not have its role to play in the final end, *eudaimonia*, the happy life. Two, the phrases ‘being possessed’ and ‘actualising itself’ point to *sophia* as something which can be acquired, but also at something which is in a process of becoming, because nothing that is static can actualise itself. With all the emphasis on *sophia*’s **not** being concerned with ‘any coming into being’, it is crucial to recognise that it is itself a process, a ‘coming into being’. And three, Aristotle poignantly describes here that *sophia* is not a means **to** an end, but an essential part or ingredient **of** that end. However, this excerpt is also suggestive of the roles of the other states of the soul in the greater process of the ‘happy life’. **More about this somewhat later.**

In his review, Aristotle confronts another problem that arises in Book VI. It is the peculiar relationship between *sophia* and *phronēsis*.

[I]t would be thought strange if practical wisdom, being inferior to philosophic wisdom, is to be put in authority over it, as seems to be implied by the fact that the art which produces anything rules and issues commands about that thing. (1143b 33–34)

This is another example where Aristotle simply presumes *sophia* to be superior without actually having demonstrated this. Unless Aristotle naturally accepts that wisdom is the superior form of knowledge of any kind, or the actualised form of knowledge. It is interesting, especially in light of the previous excerpt, that Aristotle refers to *phronēsis* as the ‘art which produces’ something, in this case *sophia*, placing *phronēsis* in direct line as the active agent which leads to the product. The parallels to the ‘art of medicine [which] produces health’ are telling. Does *phronēsis* then **produce** *sophia*? This would contradict Aristotle’s earlier statement that *sophia* is a combination of *epistēmē* and *nous*. The other strange feature in the previous excerpt is the sudden appearance of such terms as ‘inferiority’ and ‘authority over’, and ‘rules’ and ‘issues commands’. This feature results in a completely new appraisal of the states of the soul, in which there is suddenly a hierarchy, and qualitatively superior and inferior states lording it over each other. Can this really be Aristotle’s intention? Aristotle offers a little insight into the relationship between *sophia* and *phronēsis*, as he imagines it to be.

But again it (practical wisdom) is not *supreme* over philosophic wisdom, i.e. over the superior part of us, any more than the art of medicine is over health; for it does not use it but provides for its coming into being; it issues orders, then, for its sake, but not to it. (1145a 7–9)

With the amount of emphasis Aristotle places on the fact that *phronēsis* certainly does **not** rule *sophia*, one has the strong impression that he defends his thesis against a polemic, which must have preferred *phronēsis* over *sophia*. Or else, he might have felt that he had exceedingly emphasised the virtues of *phronēsis*<sup>29</sup>, but that *sophia* simply still represented the superior part in us, and he could not accede the fact that it should be in service of anything but the highest in us, the final end, *eudaimonia*. This is all speculation, resulting from a seemingly disproportionate emphasis that *phronēsis* is **not** the superior of *sophia*. However, apart from the repeated use of the parallel to the art of medicine, which underlines its importance, the previous excerpt offers more indications on what *phronēsis* **does** contribute. *Sophia*, being a combination of *epistēmē* and *nous* does not issue orders or rule, but contemplates ‘the kind of things whose originative causes are invariable’, the ‘things that are highest by nature’, and ‘the highest objects’ in which *epistēmē* has ‘received its proper completion’. *Phronēsis*, then, to provide ‘for its coming into being’, must obviously provide for the circumstances in which *sophia* can develop and thrive. Aristotle expresses this poignantly, relying on the close connections between *phronēsis* and statesmanship, and *sophia* and the ‘higher things’ to contemplate.

---

<sup>29</sup> The emphasis on the value of *phronēsis* is apparent in Book VI. In Book X, as will be seen further down, Aristotle makes a great effort to demonstrate the value of *sophia*.

Further, to maintain its (that of *phronēsis*) supremacy would be like saying that the art of politics rules the gods because it issues orders about all the affairs of the state. (1145a 10–11)

Thus, just as the art of politics provides for the guidelines, opportunities and regulated spaces that the religious festivals take place and the gods are provided with their due honour, *phronēsis* should regulate and provide space and opportunities for the coming into being and actualisation of *sophia*. Whether this position is also reflected in the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* will now be investigated.

## 6.2. *Sophia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle's discussion concerning *sophia* incorporates a number of topics which are intimately bound to this subject. By intermittently touching on the one or the other, he subtly builds up the argument for the great final demonstration in Book X, in which Aristotle praises *sophia* and the life including it to such an extent that one may feel, at times, he has lost his objective perspective for the subject at hand. It is evident that, to Aristotle, wisdom, not only as the state of mind, but in its general form too, is inseparable from happiness and *eudaimonia*. There is a parallel discussion on pleasure, which Aristotle discusses from different points of view, culminating in the inclusion in happiness. Any action, says Aristotle, is intensified by its proper pleasure, and he makes the short but very important connection, that the happy life will be pleasant. There is a pervasive dichotomy of Aristotle's emphasis on action and doing, and non-action and contemplating. The required leisure that one needs for a life of contemplation seems to clash with the unrelenting activity of the good man of *phronēsis*, both of which Aristotle holds in high regard. Further, Aristotle presents a lot of theoretical reasoning to argue his case of contemplation, and yet he repeatedly states that theory **has** to be compared to facts, and to the opinions of the community, or at least some part of it. The approach Aristotle takes resembles a discovery, presuming that people act as they do for a reason, but that they might not actually know it. Thus he uncovers layer after layer of presumed truths to discover the logical connections which underlie the phenomenon.

Another theme which is evident is the function-theory by which Aristotle considers how actions are means to ends. Closely related to this is the dependence on other factors to carry out that function. A statesman, for example, will need a community to govern, whereas the philosopher is not dependent on anyone to be able to contemplate. Thus does self-sufficiency play an important role in the significance of *sophia*. Also, as has been seen above, Aristotle regards reason to be **the** distinguishing feature of humans, who otherwise share movement and perception with other animals, and nutrition and growth

with all forms of life. Fulfilling our functions as humans, thus, means to make use of **that** significant feature which characterises us as humans and is proper to us – making use of our reason, and doing so well. In fact, Aristotle goes as far as saying that reason is the divine element in us and that partaking in the pure use of reason, which is contemplation, is a form of partaking in the divine. To Aristotle, this points to the superior quality of the contemplative faculty. However, that this is not all straight forward does not elude Aristotle’s sharp sense of factual observation. How Aristotle addresses these themes will be shown subsequently.

In order to obtain a deeper insight into Aristotle’s thoughts on *sophia* it is useful to observe what he says about those whom he believes to exhibit mastery of this state of the soul – the wise. In a discussion in Book I about the final end, Aristotle starts by taking account of differing opinions of the general population.

Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. (1095a 16–21)

Happiness seems to comply with the distinction as final end to most people; the specifics, however, need clarification. According to the previous excerpt, the ‘wise’ are people of ‘superior refinement’. These would probably have been brought up in a similar way as that which Aristotle has been seen to promote above, in the previous chapters.

Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. (1095b 3 – 6)

Arguably, those who attend such lectures on ‘what is noble and just’ and ‘the subjects of political science’ are those in Aristotle’s audience. It is a precise description of what the content of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is about. Once again the importance of their good upbringing, and with that their education, is emphasised. Aristotle continues by differentiating between three general types of life.

To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life – that just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. (1095b 13–19)

The distinction of these three types of life seems a little superficial, for surely there are more types than these. If one doesn’t fall in the categories of leading a contemplative or political life, does Aristotle really regard the life centred on enjoyment and pleasure as the only alternative? And consequently,

does Aristotle regard the political life and that of contemplation as void of pleasure and enjoyment? These problems will be addressed further down. The categories Aristotle provides here, however, reflect the framework he presents throughout the ethics. The political and the contemplative lives represent the prevalence of either one of the intellectual virtues, which were identified in the previous chapter, namely *phronēsis* in the political life, and *sophia* in the contemplative. The third category of people presumably includes those who have not developed either state of the soul to such a degree that it supervenes their lives as a virtue. In chapter eight of Book I Aristotle lists some more examples of what happiness has been identified with.

For some identify happiness with virtue, some with practical wisdom, others with a kind of philosophic wisdom, others with these, or one of these, accompanied by pleasure or not without pleasure; while others include also external prosperity. (1098b 23–27)

After having listed some general opinions, and now some more specific ideas, Aristotle moves the discussion in the direction he intends to explore.

With those who identify happiness with virtue or some one virtue our account is in harmony; for to virtue belongs virtuous activity. (1098b 30–32)

The activity as an ingredient is once again salient, and accordingly Aristotle connects this with function.

Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, [...] human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the most complete. (1098a 7–17)

It was stated earlier that the function of man consisted of him making use of his distinguishing characteristic, using his reason. Aristotle refers to this in the previous quote as ‘an activity of soul’. Thus, activity is regarded in both ways – as physical movement which demonstrates the characteristics of virtuous actions, and also as the activity of the psychological capacities which are called reason and intellect, ‘in accordance with virtue’. And as Aristotle identified three prominent types of life, he also identifies three types of goods.

Now goods have been divided into three classes, and some are described as external, others as relating to soul or to body; we call those that relate to soul most properly and truly goods, psychical actions and activities we class as relating to soul. (1098b 12–16)

The classes of goods are similarly categorised as the types of life, although, it will be seen that the parallels cannot be drawn in the strict sense. However, the categories of goods of the soul, body and external goods line up generally well with the lives of contemplation, political activity and enjoyment.

And on whose ideas does Aristotle base these categories? It is on the ideas of those who Aristotle considers to have mastered the human characteristic function well – the wise.

Therefore our account must be sound, at least according to this view (of the three classes of goods), which is an old one and **agreed on by philosophers**.  
(1089b 16–18)

Thus, after having looked at some of the opinions of the ‘general run of men’, Aristotle is now on the track of ‘the wise’, and follows these hence in his inquiry. However, even such a pursuit must be done carefully and not blindly, constantly keeping an eye on the truth, on the subject which one pursues. In the discussion on the nature of “goodness” and “the universal good”, Aristotle makes this very clear.

Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, **especially as we are philosophers or lovers of wisdom**; for while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends<sup>30</sup>. (1096a 13–16)

Not only does Aristotle here declare himself as a ‘lover of wisdom’, a philosopher, he also unequivocally prioritises truth above all else. In fact, declaring that **piety** requires those who love wisdom to ‘honour truth above [their] friends’ hints at a distinctly religious or spiritual aspect to Aristotle’s conception of philosophy. That this is no coincidence will transpire in time. However, that Aristotle considers philosophy and truth also to be embedded in one’s life and actions, and that these are the proper vehicles to become good men who lead a happy life, also becomes evident, in the following, now familiar, extract.

It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good.

But most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy. (1105b 7–18)

Thus, the true philosopher, according to Aristotle, must live out what he promotes as truth, and his actions and behaviour must reflect the conclusions of his contemplation. A philosopher, in this sense, is not engaged in the peculiarities of theory, but is sincerely interested in his personal well-being, and through his wisdom, that of his fellow citizens. He can only be ‘well in soul’ if his contemplation provides the truth which his actions and behaviour reflect. This is especially important when the

---

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle discusses at this point the theory of the Forms and Ideas which had been propagated by Plato and the Academy, or ‘friends of our own’. The point Aristotle makes is that the voice of reason in pursuit of truth must take higher priority to the voice of friends, even if these are dear.

philosopher teaches his theory to others. He will be most convincing if his observations coincide with what can be generally observed and if his own behaviour reflects what his theory teaches.

**True** arguments seem, then, most useful, not only with a view to knowledge, but with a view to life also; for since they harmonize with the [observable] facts they are believed, and so they stimulate those who understand them **to live according to them**. (1172b 3–7)

Aristotle uses this argument not only to test the theories of other philosophers, but also to guide him along the course of his own theory. Somewhat earlier the nature of pleasure had been addressed, that it was pursued by brutish, as well as the general run of men. In connection with happiness and wisdom, it was not quite clear whether it should be included in these or not. Aristotle looks at the general behaviour of people to clear any confusion.

[B]ut in fact people **evidently** avoid the one as evil (pain) and choose the other as good (pleasure); that then must be the nature of the opposition between them. (1173a 13–15)

It is useless to try to argue a point which is evidently not so. This is the type of information for which the state of the soul *epistēmē* is responsible, which attains knowledge by observation. Pleasure, then, is evidently pursued as a good. But if a brute pursues it and a wise man, can both be good, and can both be the same pleasure? Aristotle recognises the relative nature of pleasure and observes that this is connected to the nature of the activity with which it is experienced.

This may be seen, too, from the fact that each of the pleasures is bound up with the activity it completes. For an activity is intensified by its proper pleasure, since each class of things is better judged of by those who engage in the activity with pleasure; [...] those who are fond of music or of building, and so on, make progress in their proper **function by enjoying it**; so the pleasures intensify the activities, and what intensifies a thing is proper to it. (1175a 29–37)

With this argument Aristotle demonstrates that it is not pleasure as such that is an evil (which, if observed in conjunction with the actions of a brute may seem vulgar), but that it intensifies the action, any action, and is therefore dependent on the virtue of the action. He demonstrates this with another example.

As activities are different, then, so are the corresponding pleasures. Now sight is superior to touch in purity, and hearing and smell to taste; the pleasures, therefore, are similarly superior, and those of thought superior to these, and within each of the two kinds some are superior to others. (1175b 36–1176a 4)

The superiority Aristotle assigns to the different senses is at first startling. However, the ‘superior activities’ are those which we trust more with attaining truth than the others. The smell of an ingredient is affirmed by the sight of it, and similarly the observations of a process are grasped more firmly by

understanding it, rather than just by seeing. In this sense the superior activity is the one which offers a stronger affirmation of truth. And so, to obtain a more reliable source of which to observe the proper pleasures, Aristotle looks, not to the brute, but to a man who has excelled in life.

Whether, then, the perfect and supremely happy man has one or more activities, the pleasures that perfect these will be said in the strict sense to be pleasures proper to man, and the rest will be so in a secondary and fractional way, as are the activities. (1176a 26–29)

The ‘rest’ of the pleasures and activities which are proper only in a ‘secondary and fractional way’ are also better understood in light of the previous excerpt. Comparing the senses, Aristotle found that sight is superior to the others, and yet, no one (under normal circumstances) would choose to sever himself from his other senses. Although these are used in a secondary way they are certainly not superfluous. Also, that which is proper to the supremely happy man must be proper for man in general, because happiness in general is what man is thought to pursue.

And what we said before will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else *is* man. This life therefore also is the happiest. (1178a 4–7)

This statement seems at the same time both startlingly simple and dryly unconvincing. It resembles a strict teacher instructing his students that they will and must enjoy their homework. Yet, earlier it was shown that Aristotle does not appreciate following a theory blindly, but that the arguments must coincide with observations if they are to be accepted as truth. His reverence for *sophia* is even more obvious in the following extract – perhaps even getting the better of him?

And we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities; at all events the pursuit of it is thought to offer pleasures marvellous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire. (1177a 18–27)

Aristotle confirms once again that pleasure must be an element of happiness, and that the appropriate activities must be pleasant. In the last line he offers insight into his approach which permeates his whole argument concerning activities and states. Those ‘who inquire’ are engaged in an activity of pursuit, they are expending effort in order to achieve something or to get somewhere. Those ‘who know’ have already achieved their goal, or have already arrived at their destination, and may thus enjoy the sense of achievement and the leisure of having reached their destination, and thus ‘pass their time more pleasantly’. Doubtless, from what Aristotle has said up to now, he also considers this inquiry as pleasant and would certainly not dissuade anyone from pursuing knowledge. He is not arguing for the

unpleasant nature of the pursuit, but emphasises the reward of achieving the end. Far from being a mere banal exercise in logic, this particular aspect has far-reaching consequences for the way in which to understand how Aristotle perceives *eudaimonia*, the happy life. However, how Aristotle arrives at the conclusion that *sophia* offers such ‘pleasures marvellous for their purity and their enduringness’ can partially be observed in the following:

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said. (1177a 12–17)

In effect this passage only repeats in summary what has been said already; that happiness is an activity of the best thing in us, in pursuit of the best things known to man. This best thing in us will naturally guide us in our thinking and act as our ruler in our thinking and behaviour. Aristotle once again points to reason as this potential ‘best thing’; and the **activity** of this ‘best thing’ (i.e. reason), according to the highest standards, or in pursuit of the highest things, **must** surely be the highest form of happiness. In this sense Aristotle resolves:

[We] must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything. (1177b 33 – 1178a 2)

Aristotle encourages his audience (and seemingly undertakes to do so himself) to ‘strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us’. This implies that the activity Aristotle was talking about earlier is a continuing one, which is never over, and that even a small amount of wisdom is worth the effort and reward enough for the man who tries. This also implies that everyone should resolve to pursue this, and that even for the non-philosopher there await rewards for such a pursuit. It is also clear, from the previous passages, that Aristotle considers the life ‘in accordance with the best thing in us’ as partaking in the divine. Apart from the religious implications of such an approach, it is clear that, to Aristotle, philosophy is not merely an academic field, but is, or should be, a way of life. And yet, there remains something idealistic in the way Aristotle describes the life of *sophia*.

But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is something superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue (*phronēsis*). If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. (1177b 26–31)

Aristotle seems to describe this life with a sense of longing. One easily assumes that Aristotle propagates the virtues of his own life and lifestyle. However, this excerpt suggests that Aristotle portrays the ideal life of constant contemplation, not as his own, but as one which he himself strives towards. And yet, he must admit that ‘such a life would be too high for man’. What remains, is for Aristotle to consider the attainable life.

But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue (*phronēsis*) is [also] happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate. (1178a 8–10)

In the previous chapter it was seen in what high regard Aristotle holds *phronēsis*, which in this context seems to melt away in the glory of *sophia*. And although Aristotle reveres the idea of a life concerned solely with *sophia*, it is the **attainable** life that Aristotle investigates and the excellence of **this** which he pursues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is a life comprising a composite nature, of emotions and reason, and of sharing one’s space with others.

Being connected with passions also, the moral virtues must belong to our composite nature; and the virtues of our composite nature are human (not divine); so, therefore, are the life and the happiness which correspond to these. (1178a 18–21)

The moral virtues belong to our composite nature because they guide our passions, which include emotions and needs. These are one part of the composite nature, reason being the other which, according to Aristotle, is shared with the gods, or the divine. Therefore the virtues of the **composite** nature (intellectual and moral) are human, and therefore the life that includes these is also human, and so is the happiness that goes along with it. However, the striving towards excellence in the moral and intellectual virtues is also a striving towards being increasingly less dependant on others, for the day to day activities, and also for one’s happiness.

From the point of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the final good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficiency we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. (1097b 8–11)

This independence, or self-sufficiency, is clearly not intended as separateness, and Aristotle considers it to be attainable by all people, provided they have the necessary upbringing and habits to enable such proficiency. In chapter seven of Book X Aristotle elaborates on the idea of self-sufficiency, and its connection to *sophia*.

And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a philosopher, as well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessities of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act

justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same case, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate the truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient. (1177a 27–35)

It is evident in this citation that Aristotle recognises the importance of having the necessary provisions to lead a comfortable life in order to have the time and opportunity to engage in noble and virtuous activity. A hungry man may struggle to act generously, for example, although it is not impossible. However, because the philosopher is not dependent on others to engage in his activity of contemplation, he is at liberty to do so when and where he wishes. This liberty is based on the pre-condition that ‘the necessities of life’ are taken care of without the agent’s constant attention. Such liberty presumes a sense of leisure at which the agent can engage in the activity of contemplation. To be in such a position is certainly desirable and would constitute a favourable condition for happiness.

And happiness is thought to depend on leisure; for we are busy that we may have leisure, and make war that we may live in peace. Now the activity of the practical virtues is exhibited in political and military affairs, but the actions concerned with these seem to be unpleasurable. Warlike actions are completely so [...]; but the action of the statesman is also unpleasurable. (1177b 4–12)

In the previous chapter it was seen what an important role *phronēsis* plays in the life of virtuous activities. It was then a little puzzling that this state should be swept aside by *sophia* with unsatisfactory motivation. This previous passage, however, puts it into perspective. The activities which concern man in his social environment and his interaction in a group or community provide abundant opportunities to engage in noble and virtuous actions. However, these actions aim towards an end, whether this is peace between conflicting neighbours, defence against the dangers of an enemy, or the guidelines according to which the social environment can flourish. The end is always some resolution of conflict or the improvement of circumstances, so that a sense of leisure may result from it. And what good is this leisure?

So if among virtuous actions political and military actions are distinguished by nobility and greatness, and these are unpleasurable and aim at an end and are not desirable for their own sake, but the activity of reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible for man), and all the other attributes ascribed to the supremely happy man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that this will be the complete happiness of man, if it be allowed a complete term of life (for none of the attributes of happiness is incomplete). (1177b 15–25)

A lifetime of pure activity of reason and contemplation seems rather impractical, and such a life can belong only to the gods. This is once again the ideal that Aristotle portrays so that one can aim at it. The gods after all, are not dependent on the ‘necessaries of life’. However, this description shows why Aristotle finds *sophia* superior to *phronēsis*. *Sophia* is not engaged in unpleasurable activity, and is not aimed at an end other than the pure joy of engaging in it. *Phronēsis* is constantly engaged in activity, in deliberating the best means to achieve desirable ends. As the life of contemplation, and the leisure to do so, will appear desirable, *phronēsis* will deliberate about the means with which to achieve such leisure, and the conditions necessary for such a life. And yet, after having sung the praises of *sophia* and logically demonstrated its superiority over the other virtues, Aristotle is suddenly very level-headed and pragmatic about reality.

But, being a man, one will also need external prosperity; for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation; but our body also must be healthy and must have food and other attention. Still we must not think that the man who is to be happy will need many things or great things, merely because he cannot be supremely happy without external goods; **for self-sufficiency and action do not involve excess**, and we can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea. (1178 33 – 1179 4)

In this passage Aristotle demonstrates the balance which should permeate the relationship of the intellectual virtues. Although contemplation by means of *sophia* is desirable for as much as is possible, our human nature requires that we engage in practical activities too. However, the proficiency of *phronēsis* must be directed towards the opportunity to engage in contemplation, and should not become a self-enriching tool with which to subjugate fellow citizens. In such a case the focus on the desired end of the life according to *sophia* has been lost. *Sophia* must be the ‘controlling kind’ for *phronēsis* which was touched on in Book VI, and the balance is achieved by the right rule, the proportionate mean for the specific situation. Aristotle does not only justify this on moral grounds, but recognises that an excess of (external) goods, and the activities *phronēsis* is concerned with, become a hindrance to the activity of *sophia*, and an unpleasurable burden.

But the man who is contemplating the truth needs no such thing, at least with a view to the exercise of his activity; indeed they are, one may say, even hindrances, at all events to his contemplation; but in so far as he is a man and lives with a number of people, he chooses to do virtuous acts; he will therefore need such aids to living a human life. (1178b 2–7)

What remains to be seen is how and where Aristotle proposes the fifth state of the rational soul, *nous* or ‘intuitive reason’, to play a role.

## 7. ‘Intuitive reason’ (*nous*)

### 7.1. *Nous* in Book VI

*Nous* is the fifth of the states of the rational soul. Throughout the previous chapters there seems to have been an escalation in the importance of every state of the soul, starting with *technē* as the seemingly least intellectual, *epistēmē* concerning mainly taught information and syllogistic reasoning, *phronēsis* tying the moral with the intellectual virtues with action and becoming “good”, and finally *sophia*, enabling man to partake in the divine activity of contemplation of the highest goods, and to celebrate the activity of the distinguishing feature of himself, which, by virtue of being the highest or best characteristic, is most likely to be the divine element in him, his reason. It seems unlikely then, that *nous* can be elevated even higher, since *sophia* concerned the ‘best part in us’. Why would Aristotle leave this particular state of the soul for last, since the trend of the previous four must change abruptly if the discussion on *sophia* was not wholly misunderstood? This state of the soul, as it turns out, is not considered to peak over the others, but is the binding element between them. Thus, Aristotle explains his understanding of *nous* in terms of the other four states of the soul. Consequently, the passages in which information about *nous* is found are to a great extent familiar from the previous discussions. Now that the other states of the soul are better understood, these form the framework in which Aristotle presents *nous*, or ‘intuitive reason’. Once again a plain definition or explanation seems insufficient and Aristotle approaches the elusive nature of this state of the soul carefully.

Scientific knowledge is judgement about things that are universal and necessary, and the conclusions of demonstration, and all scientific knowledge, follow **from first principles** (for scientific knowledge involves proof). This being so, the first principles from which what is scientifically known follows cannot be an object of scientific knowledge, of art, or of practical wisdom; for that which can be scientifically known can be demonstrated, and art and practical wisdom deal with things that are variable. Nor are these **first principles** the objects of philosophic wisdom, for it is a mark of the philosopher to have *demonstration* about some things. If, then, the states of mind by which we have truth and are never deceived about things invariable or even variable are scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, and intuitive reason, and it cannot be any of the three (i.e. practical wisdom, scientific knowledge, or philosophic wisdom), the remaining alternative is that it is **intuitive reason** that **grasps the first principles**.  
(1140b 31 – 1141a 8)

This somewhat long-winded passage demonstrates the difficulty Aristotle has in his approach to *nous*. Initially his argument seems circular – having assumed that *nous* is a state of the soul ‘by which we have truth and are never deceived’, and recognising that the descriptions of the other states exclude first

principles as their concern, it must follow that it is *nous*. However, there is another interpretation – Aristotle considers the character of the other three states of the soul and recognises that the first principles of things play a significant role in the function of all of them, and yet, none of them seems appropriate in its recognition of the first principles. There must be another state which recognises the starting-point and end of any operation, whether physical or intellectual, and Aristotle assigns this function to *nous*. Although Aristotle has not yet fully defined the function of *nous*, nor sufficiently demonstrated this, the connection to first principles is central to the role of this state of the soul. In chapter three Aristotle refers to these starting-points in his approach towards an explanation of *epistēmē*, initially concentrating on the relevant actions, induction and syllogism.

Now induction is the starting-point which knowledge even of the universals presupposes, while syllogism proceeds *from* universals. There are therefore starting-points from which syllogism proceeds, which are not reached by syllogism; it is therefore by induction that they are acquired. (1139b 27–30)

The syllogism is the characteristic function of *epistēmē*, as can be seen in the following passage:

[F]or it is when a man believes in a certain way and the **starting-points are known to him** that he has scientific knowledge. (1139b 33–34)

This specific aspect of *epistēmē* was already burdensome in chapter four of this study. The ‘starting-points’ are evidently intimately related to *epistēmē*, because it is from these that its characteristic knowledge is inferred through syllogism. But clearly *epistēmē* starts from these, but does not acquire them itself. Similarly, *sophia* is connected to both *epistēmē* and *nous* through knowledge of the first principles.

Therefore wisdom must plainly be the most finished of the forms of knowledge. It follows that the wise man must not only know what follows from the first principles, but must also possess truth about the first principles. Therefore wisdom must be intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge – scientific knowledge of the highest objects which has received as it were its proper completion. (1141a 16–19)

Thus, through *epistēmē*, the wise man has knowledge of what follows **from** the first principles of something, and, as was seen in previous chapters, through experience and contemplation, acquires truth **about** these first principles (instead of merely learning them) through the activity of *sophia* – the first principles, however, are a precondition for both. In this passage Aristotle implies that it is through *nous* that these are acquired. This connection between these three intellectual states of the soul is once more emphasised when Aristotle almost repeats himself:

From what has been said it is plain, then, that philosophic wisdom is scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature. (1141b 2–4)

It is clear from this excerpt that in the previous passage wisdom did not merely imply the refined form of any knowledge, but certainly also *sophia*. Although it is not quite clear what Aristotle considers *nous* to be exactly, it is clear that its role is tied up with first principles, and where these are employed for further investigation, they are the starting-points from which one can safely deduct logical arguments to increase one's understanding and knowledge. It is also clear that *nous* plays a role in connection with other states of the soul. This is why Aristotle explains its function by the functions of the other states. The connection to *epistēmē* and *sophia* has now been shown. In the first quoted passage of this chapter, however, the other two states were mentioned too. Does *nous* also play a role in conjunction with *phronēsis* or *technē*? Once again, Aristotle does not easily arrive at his conclusion, but takes his audience on numerous detours to demonstrate the important factors involved in arriving at his answer.

That practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge is evident; for it is, as has been said, concerned with the ultimate particular fact<sup>31</sup>, since the thing to be done is of this nature. It is opposed, then, to **intuitive reason**; for intuitive reason is of the terms of which no account can be given, while practical wisdom is concerned with the ultimate particular. (1142a 23–26)

Aristotle's conclusion is not immediately clear. Up to this point 'intuitive reason', *nous*, has only been mentioned in connection with the starting-points and the first principles. Whether these are of the invariable and universal, or the variable and particular, has not actually been stated or established. The previous passage implies that they are opposed to the particular, which would indeed explain the close affinity *nous* shares with *epistēmē* and *sophia*. What is clear, however, is that Aristotle struggles to find words explaining what *nous* really is supposed to do. If it is of the 'terms of which no account can be given', his predicament becomes understandable. But why does he then insist on including such a vague state to the intellectual, rational soul? Similarly as above, where *nous* was almost incidentally mentioned in the discussions of the other states of the soul, an answer slowly develops while Aristotle explains something entirely different.

For **understanding** is neither about things that are always and that are unchangeable, nor about any and every one of the things that come into being, but about things which may become subjects of questioning and deliberation. (1143a 4–5)

Understanding is thus unconcerned whether a 'thing' is variable or invariable, but concerns itself with identifying possible subjects which are worth pursuing by mental effort. Aristotle continues:

Hence it is about the same objects as practical wisdom; but understanding and practical wisdom are not the same. For practical wisdom commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done; but understanding only judges. (1143a 6–9)

---

<sup>31</sup> Whereas scientific knowledge is concerned with the universal and invariable.

In saying this, Aristotle implies that *phronēsis* is not so much concerned whether a ‘thing’ is universal or particular, but whether it is worth pursuing. The big difference between these two, says Aristotle, is that understanding identifies subjects worthy of pursuit, whereas *phronēsis* commands action towards this subject, **does** the pursuing. The role of *nous* in this context is discussed somewhat further down.

Now all states we have considered converge, as might be expected, to the same point; for when we speak of judgement and understanding and practical wisdom and intuitive reason we credit the same people with possessing judgement and having reached years of reason and with having practical wisdom and understanding. For all these faculties deal with ultimates, i.e. with particulars. (1143a 25–29)

That Aristotle casually accepts ‘ultimates’ as ‘particulars’ will be discussed shortly. First, it is enlightening that Aristotle makes the point that these states converge and are naturally coexistent. This is because they are different parts of the same process. *Phronēsis* cannot excel without understanding and making judgements. Understanding identifies subjects worth of pursuit, and judgement chooses which subject to pursue, and to pursue it. *Phronēsis* is the state of the soul under whose auspices these processes take place. Arguably, deliberation is bound up with these in determining the best means. The role of *nous* is clearly tied up with *phronēsis*, opposing Aristotle’s earlier sentiments, but this role is still elusive. Aristotle explains himself in the following, somewhat lengthy, passage.

Now all things which have to be done are included among particulars or ultimates; for not only must the man of practical wisdom know particular facts, but understanding and judgement are **also** concerned with things to be done, and these are ultimates. And intuitive reason is concerned with the **ultimates in both directions**; for both the first terms and the last are objects of intuitive reason and not of argument, and the intuitive reason which is presupposed by demonstrations grasps the unchangeable and first terms, while the intuitive reason involved in practical reasoning grasps the last and variable fact, i.e. the minor premiss. For these variable facts are the starting-points for the apprehension of the end, since the universals are reached from the particulars; of these therefore we must have perception; **and this perception is intuitive reason.** (1143a 32 – 1143b 5)

Throughout Book VI there are ultimately two opposing sides to which information and knowledge belong, and the states of the rational soul are likewise delegated to either one of these, depending on the side on which they operate. These are the invariable, universal side, and the variable and particular side. Things that are unchangeable are considered universal, and are apprehended by those states of the soul which apprehend these, namely *epistēmē* and *sophia*. Things which change are variable, related to particular instances and are apprehended by the practical states of the soul, *technē* and *phronēsis*. Both sides have starting-points, and both sides have an end in sight, whether this is a general end or a particular. This is the framework in which these states of the soul function, as Aristotle understands it. Consequently, Aristotle assigns the apprehension of the framework to another state of the soul – this is

*nous*. In the previous excerpt he argues that the first principles, which are constant and invariable, from which demonstration and syllogism proceed, and the ends which guide these, are apprehended by *nous*. And similarly, the particular facts in relation to the universal or general ends which provide the framework of deliberate action, are also apprehended by *nous*, since in all cases these first and last terms are apprehended by a certain kind of perception, ‘and this perception is intuitive reason’. Also, the perception which recognises a universal trend from the observation of particular facts or instances, which is necessary for induction, is the activity of *nous*.

This means that *nous* is not only active in the activity of every other state of the rational soul, but that it is the agent which binds these states to one another, and it provides the common ground for interaction between these states. The common ground provided by a capacity to apprehend the beginning and the end of things. Thus Aristotle states:

Hence intuitive reason is both beginning and end; for demonstrations are from these and about these. (1143b 9–10)

## 7.2. *Nous in the Nicomachean Ethics*

As can be seen in the discussion above, Aristotle struggles to describe clear, salient features of *nous*. However, he does not seem to be confused about its meaning or function. Interestingly, *nous* as such is only discussed properly in Book VI. In the rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle never explicitly discusses it again, except through references to some of its functions, which include perception and knowledge of the first principles, starting-points and ends, and a kind of ‘perception’ as such. However, Aristotle’s **application** of the characteristic functions of *nous* throughout his discussions is scattered throughout the entire treatise. The characteristic pattern of Aristotle’s method follows the lines of starting with an assumption, concisely describing what basis this has, then moving forward in logical steps or syllogisms toward a distinct end. Aristotle follows this pattern in short arguments as well as the longer ones, and the ends of the shorter arguments augment the end of the entire argument, thus forming stepping-stones or constituent parts of the whole. One such example is the assumption from which Aristotle proceeds in Book VI, which forms the basis of this study.

In the absence of such explicit discussions of, or about, *nous* in the other books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a study of the discussions where the affiliated functions occur proves enlightening on what else Aristotle considers relevant to this state of the soul. It is primarily in discussions about first principles, starting-points, and ends, that Aristotle reveals how *nous* is involved, or functions, and it is interesting

that he describes the acquisition of the starting-points and ends in more detail than in Book VI. In chapter four of Book I Aristotle introduces his method with a caution to his audience:

Let us not fail to notice, however, that there is a difference between arguments **from** and those **to** first principles. (1095a 30–31)

The arguments **from** first principles play a special role in the acquisition and activity of *epistēmē*. The arguments **to** first principles are closely connected to *nous*. How is it, though, that such an argument is undertaken? Aristotle emphasises the importance of upbringing in a passage already familiar from the investigation of *epistēmē*:

Presumably, then, *we* must begin with things known to *us*. Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subject of political science must have been brought up in good habits. (1095b 2–4)

This much is known by now. However, the focus in this case falls on the point of departure which Aristotle announces. In the absence of established first principles, it is prudent to ‘**begin** with things known to *us* (the inquirers)’. He continues:

For the fact is a starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him, he will not need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting-points. (1095b 5–8)

The acquisition, then, of starting-points improves with a good upbringing or education, and the proficiency with which to do this can also be improved. This means that the ability to recognise and acquire starting-points is moulded and improved with education, and is thus a process and not a condition. To acquire the starting-point, the ‘fact’ should be ‘sufficiently plain’ to the agent – and this is an action reliant on observation and perception. The ‘fact’ had already been burdensome in chapter four, and seems to present the same problems here. However, in the current context, Aristotle arrives at a much clearer understanding of the perception of such ‘facts’. Once again he does this in small steps:

Nor must we demand the cause in all matters alike; it is enough in some cases that the *fact* be well established, as in the case of the first principles; **the fact is a primary thing or first principle**. (1098a 34 – 1098b 2)

This statement once again emphasises that ‘the fact is a starting-point’, as was stated above, and the fact is now expressly stated to be a first-principle. And, at this point, Aristotle provides a much more detailed description of how such first principles are to be found.

Now of first principles we see some by induction; some by perception, some by a certain habituation, and others too in other ways. But each set of principles we must try to investigate in the natural way, and we must take pains to determine them correctly, since they have a great influence on what follows. For the beginning is thought to be more than half of the whole, and many of the questions we ask are cleared up by it. (1098b 2–8)

Clearly, Aristotle presumes that first principles can be **misunderstood**, for else it would not be so important to have the proper upbringing and habituation. This ‘perception’ is clearly not merely an acceptance of incoming information, but must be done correctly. The importance of the first principles is also emphasised, as Aristotle points to the relationship of the ‘beginning’ and the ‘whole’.

Essentially, this is the same relationship as that of the first principles of an action and its end. However, there is clearly not just one method, or one way, of acquiring first principles. And part of the process of acquiring them is an investigation, and a determination of their applicability and ‘correctness’. Aristotle approaches this problem with examples, and describes obvious aspects in these which point to some form of an answer. The focus here is on deliberation, but the description of what it does **not** do provides excellent clues on the matter at hand.

We deliberate not about ends but about means. For a doctor does not deliberate whether he shall heal, nor an orator whether he shall persuade, nor a statesman whether he shall produce law and order, nor does any one else deliberate about his end. They assume the end and consider how and by what means it is to be attained; [...] till they come to the first cause, which in the order of discovery is last.  
(1112b 12–19)

It is here that Aristotle is a little unclear. On the one hand, first principles must be acquired and investigated, and on the other the ends must be assumed (and **not** deliberated about). However, as stated previously, this passage focuses on **deliberation**, which is a calculation about the means towards an end – an end which has already been scrutinised for its correctness. Certainly, a doctor, at some early stage in his education, will have thoroughly thought about his intentions considering his career. However, once he is qualified and practising, he won’t contemplate about his intentions for every patient – whether he should, or should not, try to bring him to health. This has become a precondition. And this precondition is linked to the function. In his choice to become a doctor, that man has accepted and embraced the function of healing – and while he continues to perform his function this end is taken for granted. However, Aristotle describes how this end is taken as a starting-point in a backward calculation of the necessary means, in this fashion: “to achieve Z, I must do Y and X; and to get to Y and X, W V and U must be achieved”. This goes on until the first do-able action is found, which will be the starting-point of the ensuing action. As Aristotle observes, this is ‘the first cause, which in the order of discovery is last’. Realising that this is a little abstract, Aristotle describes this idea with another example.

For the person who deliberates seems to enquire and analyse in the way described as though he were analysing a geometrical construction [...], and what is last in the order of analysis seems to be first in the order of becoming. (1112b 19–23)

Thus, whether one has the end and proceeds from this to find the ‘first cause’, first principle, or starting-point, or whether one perceives the starting-point as a ‘fact’ (or obvious condition), these two (the starting-point and the end) provide the framework for an action. This description also elucidates Aristotle’s contention from Book VI that *nous* is concerned with ‘the ultimates in both directions’, i.e. the starting-points and the ends.

Once this idea has been described in reasonably clear and general terms, Aristotle turns toward another important aspect of the *Ethics* – the connection to good behaviour. In chapter eight of Book VII Aristotle assimilates the first principles into behaviour and virtuous action.

For virtue and vice respectively preserve and destroy the first principles, and in actions the final cause is the first principle, as the hypotheses are in mathematics; neither in that case is it argument that teaches the first principles, nor is it so here – virtue either natural or produced by habituation is what teaches right opinion about the first principles. (1151a 15–18)

It becomes apparent that Aristotle sees a close connection between the logical construct of mathematics, and the interaction of psycho-emotional faculties, and the explicit activity or behaviour of a person. Whether such interaction really follows such logical routes is debatable; however, this close connection which Aristotle draws provides some insight into his understanding of such processes. Thus, with the parallel of the mathematical model, in which the hypothesis (or hypotheses) is used as the primary assumption from which to proceed, and which will be proved or disproved by the ensuing calculation, Aristotle shows how the first principles of actions may be used as the primary assumption (or the final cause, or starting-point), and how, by means of calculation, deliberation, or just trying it out, this primary assumption should be re-evaluated according to its applicability. With experience, the agent will have less trouble in acquiring good starting-points, in a shorter time, in pursuit of what he knows is a good end. Virtue, developed through good habits, gives such a man a firm grasp of noble ends and the appropriate actions and behaviour, or means, towards these. Lack of virtue (i.e. vice) will leave a man in doubt about such ends, whether they are good, and whether they are worth pursuing; and also about the optimal means of starting off, and of approaching his ends. Even in such cases, Aristotle recognises different problems confronting those people. There is the man who recognises that the end is good and ought to be pursued, but struggles to actually do so; and then there is the man who does not recognise good ends as good, but chooses ends which appear beneficial to him only in an immediate sense, and fails to see that these are not good in the long term, or that they are detrimental to others.

But there is a sort of man who is carried away as a result of passion and contrary to the right rule – a man whom passion masters so that he does not act according to the right rule, but [it] does not master [him] to the extent of making him ready to believe

that he ought to pursue such pleasures without reserve; this is the incontinent man, who is better than the self-indulgent man, and not bad without qualification; **for the best thing in him, the first principle, is preserved.** (1151a 20–26)

The incontinent man, then, realises which ends are good or bad **because** the first principles are preserved in him, although he is lead astray by his passions and pleasure (the sort contrary to the right rule). And Aristotle considers these first principles the ‘best thing in him’, presumably because they are the primary link towards the life of continued practise of good and noble actions, because he recognises the goodness of such ends. The self-indulgent man does not posses this link, nor the perception of such ends, and Aristotle ascribes this to the lack of first principles, or **his** primary principles. It becomes increasingly apparent how interlinked the individual elements are which have been investigated and discussed in this study. The right rule is that which is in accordance with *phronēsis* and is recognised by it; the good ends and their corresponding starting-points are recognised through the first principles, of which the right opinion is reached through proper habituation according to the principles of *phronēsis*. In effect, the one cannot exist without the other.

Similarly, in Book IX Aristotle demonstrates the close connection between contemplation and perception, the corresponding activities of *sophia* and *nous*, in one of his characteristic detours of winding observations and descriptions, finally arriving at a perfectly logical conclusion that life and happiness are good and pleasant.

But if life itself is good and pleasant (which it seems to be, from the very fact that all men desire it, and particularly those who are good and supremely happy; for to such men life is most desirable, and their existence is the most supremely happy); and if he who sees **perceives** that he sees, and who hears, that he hears, and he who walks, that he walks, and in the case of all other activities similarly there is something which perceives that we are active, so that if we perceive, we perceive that we perceive, and if we think, that we think, and if to perceive that we perceive or think is to perceive that we exist (for existence was defined as perceiving or thinking); and perceiving that one lives is in itself one of the things that are pleasant (for life is by nature good, and to perceive what is good present in oneself is pleasant); and if life is desirable, and particularly so for good men, because to them existence is good and pleasant (for they are pleased at the consciousness of the presence in them of what is in itself good)... (1170a 25 – 1170b 5)

Aristotle continues to conclude that such a supremely happy man may recognise another such self, and find the other also pleasant and good, and these would choose to be friends and engage in their most prized activity, contemplation, together. The perception of one’s own existence, and of those virtues and potentials of goodness, and the conscious activity of these potentials, seems to Aristotle as a highly prized knowledge and source of happiness. His ‘ode to *sophia*’, which was discussed in the previous

chapter, springs to mind. This ‘perception’ however, must be *nous*, as it is the perception of the first principles of life, and of the psychological capacities, and of being. Once again, the inter-connectedness is evident, and the proper functioning of *sophia* is inextricably linked to the activity of *nous*.

## 8. Discussion

In the analysis of the five states of the rational soul, in the context of Book VI and in that of the entire *Nicomachean Ethics*, various topics and themes are encountered repeatedly. Some of these have been sought out for the following discussion, since they seem particularly relevant for this study. In chapter 5.2 it was already discussed that some confusion may arise from the use of the same term for either a field of inquiry or for a state of the soul, termed so by Aristotle, which is closely connected to that corresponding field of which it gets its name. This will be discussed in chapter 8.1 below.

Further, there is evidently a difficult relationship between action and theory. On the one hand Aristotle has the highest praise for *sophia* and contemplation, on the other he repeatedly states that theory without action is of little use. This relationship will be explored further in chapter 8.2.

In the Introduction (of this study) it was stated that the idea of a close cooperation between the states of the soul will be explored. The preceding study has already drawn attention to this on numerous occasions, and these will be addressed in chapter 8.3.

Finally, although this study did not focus on *eudaimonia* as such, as the primary focus of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, this has to be addressed. How this study relates to *eudaimonia* will be discussed in chapter 8.4.

### 8.1. States of the soul vs. fields of knowledge

As just mentioned, the potential confusion between a term indicating a state of the soul and the same term indicating a field of knowledge or action has been addressed in chapter 5.2. The case of *technē* (which was also used in that instance) makes the point quite clearly – where it concerns the “field”, *technē* implies an art or a craft; where it implies the state of the soul, however, *technē* indicates that part of the psyche which is engaged when such an art or a craft is practised, or, arguably, when any practical combination of one’s knowledge and one’s skill is applied to produce an outcome. Similarly, *epistēmē* indicates on the one hand, a body or form of knowledge mostly associated with formal education, and on the other, the state of the soul with which Aristotle presumes we engage with this form of information, with a characteristic orientation towards the universal and evident (or self-evident) nature of its objects. *Sophia* on the one hand is wisdom, but, on the other, is the state of the soul by which we contemplate universal objects, and those highest (or most highly esteemed) by nature.

This rather meticulous distinction implies a difference between engaging in the activity (e.g. a *technē*) and employing that state of the mind for an activity where it is needed. Thus, it would be wrong to say, for instance, that Aristotle has only contempt for *technē*, because he does not hold artisans in high esteem. There is a distinction between the state of the soul and the profession in which this state is acutely evident (e.g. *sophia* – philosopher, *technē* – artisan, *phronēsis* – politician), and one cannot simply equate the two. Thus, the question whether one can make use of *technē* and *sophia* (as states of the soul) does not imply that one practice two professions. And, this distinction also allows for the fact that a man practicing a *technē* can employ the full range of the states of the soul which Aristotle mentions, even *sophia*.

Once again, *technē* makes a good example, perhaps because it seems the least intellectual of the states of the soul. However, attention may be drawn to the fact that Aristotle quite clearly includes *technē* as a state of the **intellectual, rational soul**. In chapter 3.1 it was shown that Aristotle’s definition-like statement of *technē* expresses it as ‘a state of capacity to make, involving a **true course of reasoning**’ (1140a 8–9). Clearly then, *technē* as a state of the intellectual soul is a capacity to **reason**, rationally and practically. Considering that Aristotle also counted medicine, navigation, and architecture as a *technē*, it is not at all surprising that this is so. As was seen in chapter 3.1, these “fields” are also referred to as ‘sciences’, and the inference was made that this is due to their dual nature, comprising both theory and application. However, even if *technē* (as the state of the soul) is responsible for the application or production part of the activity, it still applies theory in that instant of engaging in the activity.

Also, *technē* is characteristically acquired through the repetition of action, to such an extent that it becomes a subconscious ability. The apprentice learns different techniques and has to practice them, repeat them, habituate them, and master them, and thus (as was seen in chapter 3.2) Aristotle tells us: ‘For the things we have to learn before we can do them, **we learn by doing them**’ (1103a 33). However, Aristotle was here referring to the acquisition of virtues, and that is exactly the point. The acquisition of virtues – and this counts for the virtues of character and those of the intellect – is effected by learning them, and by the continuous practising of them, in the same way as an apprentice acquires the techniques of his craft. Thus, *technē*, as the state of the soul, is active in the acquisition of the virtues, in the habituation of the virtues, and in the maturation and perfection of the virtues. It seems then, if Aristotle says that ‘wisdom must be intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge – scientific knowledge of the highest objects which has received as it were its proper completion’ (1141a

17–19, see chapter 6.1), that the ‘proper completion’ is due to the activity of *technē*. In fact, if ethics is based on the principle of habits, as Aristotle states it is, as can be seen in chapter 5.2 (1103a 17–18), the habituation and development of the virtues, and this includes the intellectual virtues, can only proceed from the activity of *technē* in its function as a state of the rational soul. This points to the reason why Aristotle chose to name this state of the intellectual soul ‘*technē*’: he recognised that there is an intellectual capacity active in the acquisition and development of the virtues of character and intellect which closely resembles the intellectual capacity active when acquiring and developing practical techniques – thus he named this intellectual capacity ‘*technē*’.

Once again, this points to the cooperative nature of the intellectual states of the soul. There can be no *sophia* without the activity of *technē*, neither any of the other intellectual states of the soul. A clearer framework now starts to transpire from the analysis of Book VI. On the one hand there is *nous*, which enables one to recognise the starting-points and the ends, and the first principles of things; on the other hand there is *technē*, which is active in the acquisition and development of habits and virtues – from these develop the capabilities of the remaining intellectual states of the soul. *Epistēmē* is principally responsible for the acquisition of information. *Phronēsis* specialises in the practical application of information for the good (in particular or in general), and *sophia* excels in the contemplation of theoretical truths, of the ‘divine’ and ‘the things that are highest by nature’ (1141b 3; see chapter 6.1).

## 8.2. The close connection between action and theory

Throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* there is a constant back-and-forth between action and theory. This is evident in such distinctions as that of moral and intellectual virtues, between goods of the body and goods of the soul, and quite distinctly, between the value of *phronēsis* and *sophia*. As a result of this (the latter in particular), theory is often exalted over action because of Aristotle’s praise of *sophia* in Book X. However, in chapter two of Book VI (see chapter 6.1) the work (or responsibility) of both these intellectual virtues is stated as ‘truth’. Now, that *sophia*, in its contemplation of the highest things by nature, also contemplates truth, is easily acceptable. However, a truth that is not reflected in reality, or is otherwise disconnected from reality, is worth little to Aristotle, for what “truth” can this be? Similarly, Aristotle dismisses the idea of a “good” which is entirely disconnected from reality, in Book I 6 (see chapter 5.2), arguing that ‘clearly it could not be achieved or attained by man; **but we are now seeking something attainable**’ (1096b 35). Additionally, if ‘truth’ is the ‘work’ of both these intellectual virtues, and *sophia* engages with (or acquires) this truth by means of contemplation (thus theory), how would *phronēsis* engage with truth? *Phronēsis*, with its focus on practical application,

engages with its environment through action. Thus, *phronēsis* acquires or ‘possesses’ truth through action. This is essential, for, as Aristotle warns, those who lose themselves in theory and are disconnected from reality are like patients who listen to the doctor, but don’t follow his instructions (see chapters 5.2 and 6.2; Book II 5). Aristotle is here speaking about the well-being of the soul (psychological health) which, he says, can only be enjoyed if the truth is grasped in both spheres, or, in other words, if there is no conflict between one’s theoretical truth and that of one’s reality, which is engaged in and demonstrated through action. Thus, to enjoy ‘wellness of soul’ (which is essential for happiness) the truth of theory must ‘harmonize’ with the truth of one’s actions and behaviour (see also chapter 4.2).

The ‘wellness of soul’ is critical in this context. Aristotle could probably not care less about those who demonstrate a “disharmony” of action and theory, if that is their wish to do so. However, if the aim is happiness, the life of happiness (*eudaimonia*), then, Aristotle argues, it is essential that one find harmony in both spheres, that both action and theory ‘possess’ the same truth. Now, it is not only in the harmony of such truth that the happy life suddenly appears. *Eudaimonia* is an activity, as life, also, is an activity, and so it is *phronēsis* which recognises what ‘sorts of things conduce to the good life in general’ (1140a 28; see chapter 5.1).

### **8.3. The cooperative nature of the five states of the soul**

In the discussion above it becomes clear that *phronēsis* and *sophia* both have to arrive at the same truth for internal harmony and wellness of soul to preside. Furthermore, both have to be actively employed to arrive at such truth. Further above (chapter 8.1) indications towards the cooperative nature of the states of the soul transpired and were partly discussed. However, this nature has already been referred to on numerous occasions during the analysis, increasingly so towards the end.

The cooperative nature of the five states of the soul is sometimes stated explicitly by Aristotle, but usually merely implied. In chapters 6.1 and 7.1 some explicit examples were discussed concerning the nature of *sophia* as a combination of *nous* and *epistēmē*. As was seen there, Aristotle clearly states that a state of the soul can be (and should be) considered to function as a combination of two others. Also, in the analysis of *nous* in chapter seven, it became clear that Aristotle used the other states of the soul to explain how, and what, the function is of *nous*. The conclusion drawn in chapter 7.2 revealed that *nous* functions as the common denominator between the other states of the soul, facilitating their individual functioning, but also their cooperation.

Towards the end of chapter 6.1 the analysis showed that *phronēsis* is, to some extent, responsible for *sophia*'s 'coming into being', but also provides the space for it to function and thrive. On the other hand, towards the end of chapter 6.2, it was shown that *sophia* is the 'controlling kind' (of virtue) for *phronēsis*, and acts as a source of orientation for it. Also in chapter 6.2 Aristotle's example of the different senses was discussed. Although Aristotle states that the pleasure derived from thought is 'superior' to that of the other senses (i.e. sight, smell, taste, touch), no one would seriously consider separating oneself from one's other senses. A full experience of reality is only achieved with the combination of all senses working together well. Although this is not directly connected to the states of the soul, the message is clear: as some senses seem to Aristotle more pure than others, and so too their corresponding pleasures, and yet, no one would choose to sever himself of any of these, some intellectual states of the soul may seem superior to others (with their corresponding pleasure), but this does not imply that the "inferior" states should be ignored, severed, or excluded from one's experience. It is only through their participatory activity and functioning that a proper and full experience of reality is possible.

In chapter 7.1 the close relation between *phronēsis* and *nous* was discussed with reference to Aristotle's discussion in Book VI 11 where he states that 'all states we have considered converge, as might be expected, to the same point'. Although Aristotle does not clearly direct this statement at the five states of the soul, but at *phronēsis*, *nous*, 'judgement' and 'understanding', he does follow by saying that 'we credit the same people with possessing judgement and having reached years of reason and with having practical wisdom and understanding'. Aristotle is saying that the same people will exhibit mastery of different intellectual capabilities, because these do not develop independently, but in combination with one another. However, he does **explicitly** state that at least *phronēsis* and *nous* 'converge to the same point' ('as might be expected'). In other words, the notion that different states of the soul can function in one person and can cooperate is implied by Aristotle with 'converge to the same point'. Aristotle explicitly states that *sophia* is a combination of *epistēmē* and *nous*, and also that *phronēsis* is responsible for its (*sophia*'s) coming into being.

It may seem curious that so much emphasis is placed here on these points which seem rather evident. However, it is even more curious that the cooperative nature of the five states of the soul is usually overlooked or neglected. Much effort has been lost in countless arguments of excruciating complexity as a result of this neglect (examples include Knight 2007, Richardson Lear 2004). How the conceptual

understanding of the cooperative nature of the five states of the soul may affect the understanding of *eudaimonia* will briefly be discussed in the following section.

#### 8.4. *Eudaimonia*

Aristotle begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* with the notion that every art, every inquiry, every action and pursuit aims at some good and end. Most ends (or goods) lead to others, and are intermediate steps in a greater system, leading to further, greater ends. Aristotle presumes that there is a principle which acts as beginning and end, and gives these actions and pursuits direction and purpose. Knowing this principle would be very valuable, turning actions from subconsciously directed variable ends to a consciously chosen deliberate direction. ‘Will not the knowledge of it, then,’ says Aristotle, ‘have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, **be more likely** to hit upon what is right?’ (1094a 22–25). As was seen in the analysis, Aristotle concludes that this principle is happiness, or using his term, *eudaimonia*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle essentially tries to devise a reliable method which should enable individuals and societies to ‘be more likely to hit upon what is right’, or to be “most likely” to hit it, and this target Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*. In this brief discussion on *eudaimonia* some of the key elements which play a role in the understanding of *eudaimonia* will be looked at, especially in the context of the five states of the rational soul. Aristotle expresses his conception of this principle clearly:

Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world.  
(1099a 24–25)

When reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* it can sometimes seem that Aristotle tries to persuade his audience to adopt a set of restrictive rules which, although not much fun, represent the “moral high-ground” and embody the “ought-to” fundamentals of behaviour. However, if one pays close attention, it becomes clear (as in the excerpt above) that Aristotle sincerely searches for the best possible method to achieve a life of enduring and satisfying happiness. This life of happiness would include such elements that the wisest would choose for their own happiness, and not necessarily such things that people choose who clearly do not think ahead much. That this life will include a sense of nobility intuitively seems likely, because the wise usually display such nobility in their behaviour. And, perhaps most importantly, this life and this happiness will, and should, be extremely pleasant. For, else, it would not be called “happiness”, and certainly not so by the wise<sup>32</sup>.

---

<sup>32</sup> Hughes (2001: 205 – 209) offers level-headed discussion on the question, whether the Aristotelian ‘fulfilled life’ is also enjoyable.

Now, if some wise men had found happiness, and if these would like to share their experiences and insights on how best to reach that same form of happiness, what would they possibly offer as their counsel? This is the starting-point Aristotle assumes on his search for happiness. He often looks at what the ‘supremely happy man’ does to extract some clues for his endeavour. In Book I 8 Aristotle observes the general opinion which ‘harmonizes with our own account’ that ‘the happy man lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action’ (1098b 20–22). In chapter 5.2.4 the role of education and legislation was shown, forming the guidelines and framework for such good action, and a good life, at least in potential. Education and laws provide the structure for good habits to form in, and to be practised and maintained. It is these that provide the best tools to continually practise good action and to achieve a good life of self-sufficiency and happiness, *eudaimonia*.

Naturally, these habits are more likely to lead to such a life if the education and laws through which they are taught and upheld are based on rational principles and the experience of those who live such lives themselves – thus, as was seen in chapter 5.2.4, if they are aligned with the principles of *phronēsis*. And, as *sophia* is the ‘controlling kind’, the guide, of *phronēsis* (see chapter 6.1), so it is the ‘wise’ who should be responsible for the formation of education and the legislation of the laws (as seen above). Because *sophia* provides the orientation for *phronēsis*, and *phronēsis* provides the practical and particular expression and demonstration of this orientation, through the articulation of the content and form for education and the laws in this case, the habits which form through such a system should conceivably lead back to *sophia*. In such a way the circle closes (or continues its revolution) and the end becomes the starting-point.

In chapter 6.1 it also becomes apparent that *sophia* is a process, a ‘coming into being’, which develops and matures with experience. This should not be surprising, as Aristotle says that ‘no one is thought to be a philosopher by nature’ (1143b 6), and wisdom is generally thought to come with age and experience. Similarly, the other states of the soul, although they may be present in potential, need to be developed and practised to achieve proficiency in them. This can usually be effected through habituation and practice, by engaging in activity in which they are required. It is also apparent that not all states of the soul develop at the same time in the same degree. When Aristotle says that ‘wisdom must be intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge – scientific knowledge of the highest objects which has received as it were its proper completion’ (1141a 18–19), then clearly wisdom (and *sophia*) develops as a result of the maturation and mastery of *epistēmē* and *nous*.

This observation inherently points to the insight that there is a good time and place in which the proficiency and mastering of a state of the soul may be expected. Thus, despite Aristotle's praise for *sophia*, it does not naturally follow that he envisions a life that is completely filled with contemplation. The development of one's reason is brought about by the cooperative development of **all** states of the soul. *Technē*, being the most accessible to children, will usually be focused on first (thus the importance of habits, or continual repetition), and *epistēmē* will follow as the child is taught the curricular knowledge of the day, at school (or similar institution). And although Aristotle says that one may have *nous* 'by nature' (1143b 7, see chapter 6.1), in chapter 7.2 it also becomes clear that even this state of the soul may develop and improve with education and experience. *Phronēsis*, as was seen in chapter 5.1, also needs to develop as it relies on experience **and** knowledge – as Aristotle says, 'a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found' (1142a 13).

All that this shows is that the states of the soul develop and grow with practice and habituation, in and through activity, and that no one state can be fully developed without the relevant development of another state. This, however, only points back to the cooperative nature of the states of the soul, as seen above. On the other hand, this also shows how the states of the soul can be employed and practised on the principle of *sophia* at their different stages of development, and without *sophia* necessarily having fully developed itself, by growing within the framework laid out by the habits and laws based on the principles of *phronēsis*, orientated to *sophia*. In such a way *sophia* is the starting-point and the end, and is present throughout the process of growth, throughout the activities which are engaged in, and throughout the activity of life. Does this comprise happiness though?

It is not enough that one is brought up according to the principle of *sophia*, though this may give one ample opportunity to excel and thrive. The awareness of oneself in relation to one's circumstances, and the perception one has of one's capabilities, and of one's sufficiency in a changing environment, which may provide a conscious realisation and appreciation of oneself – this is what supersedes contemplation and *sophia* in relation to oneself. At the end of chapter 7.2 this perception was shown to be *nous*. However, happiness **is** not *nous*. Happiness is the perception of oneself in good circumstances, that conscious knowledge of goodness, pleasantness, and oneself in it<sup>33</sup>. Happiness is doing well and living well – and to be aware of it. It is the conscious perception of what one is, does, and has, and the realisation that this is good. Happiness is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world.

---

<sup>33</sup> Of course, one can be happy under all sorts of circumstances. Incredible examples of people finding happiness under terrible conditions can always be found – however, one generally does not choose a terrible lot in order to persevere against all odds.

## 9. Formal Conclusion

In the Introduction it was stated that a better and clearer understanding of the five ‘states of the soul’ would be sought by analysing Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and by piecing together the relevant information about every state on its own. Precisely this was done in the preceding study. After every section, in which one state at a time was scrutinized in the context of Book VI, the process was repeated by searching for relevant information about that state throughout the entire *Nicomachean Ethics*. This meticulous process led to a clearer picture of what Aristotle intended these states of the soul to mean, what functions they play in their capacity as intellectual tools and virtues, and what role they play in the habitual process whereby one becomes a better person, which forms the basis of Aristotle’s ethics. This was done in a step-by-step discovery of putting together seemingly disparate pieces and thereby looking at every piece on its own, and, subsequently, looking at it in a newly-forming context. As the picture grew in depth and clarity, more complex issues transpired, but these could be arranged into the context which was becoming increasingly evident.

By piecing together relevant statements from the text the obscurity which is often encountered around Aristotle’s ideas could be lifted. The clearer picture offered a vivid insight into a highly dynamic theory of the mind which rests on keen observation and creative formulation. What also became evident is that the theory is not driven by a desire to outdo others in complexity and theoretical obscurity, but by a genuine desire to enable individuals and societies to acquire their highest potential and joy – to not only reach, but to lead the “good and happy life”, *eudaimonia*.

It was seen that each state of the soul has a different, characteristic role to play. These roles do not only differ in the type of information with which they engage, but also in their relational function toward each other in a cooperative and supportive system. The close relationship between action and theory pointed to the close relationship between those states of the soul which function mainly with *theōria* and those more engaged in the application of such theory. However, it also became clear that their responsibilities lie as much with the interaction with the outside world as they do with that directed at one another. Thus, their values lie not primarily in the pleasure derived from the use of one state of the soul at a time, but rather, in the appropriate combination of the states in cooperation with each other. This cooperative use happens naturally and unconsciously to a limited degree. However, it can be practised and improved through proper training and habituation. This implies that the result is within reach of those who can afford to have such training, or to those who are fortunate enough to grow up in a society where this training is provided through its basic education. Statesmen should keep this in

mind. This also implies that happiness is something within reach and, unless some great external misfortunes prevent it, can be acquired by individuals and societies.

Happiness, if based on the principles of wisdom, is also not only pleasant for the individuals, but makes for pleasant social interaction and governing. By focusing the preceding study on the five parts of the rational soul, a clearer understanding of Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*, the life of goodness and happiness, was achieved. This does not rule out the importance of the moral virtues of character, in which Aristotle invests much effort in his explanations. However, the intellectual virtues offer a good perspective from which to study the inter-related complex of the different virtues and their interaction, which Aristotle presents as the essential subject of investigation when one wishes to aim towards a good and meaningful life. The investigation of this subject is, to a large degree, what Aristotle does in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

## 10. Bibliography

### 10.1.1. Sources specifically referred to in the text

Ackrill, J. L. 1973. *Aristotle's Ethics*. London: Faber and Faber.

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. English translation: Arckrill, J. L. 1973. *Aristotle's Ethics*. London: Faber and Faber.

German translation: Dirlmeier, F. 1969, 2003 (rev. ed.), 2008. *Aristoteles Nikomachische Ethik*. Stuttgart: Reclam.

German translation: Gigon, O. 1972 (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), 1981 (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). *Aristoteles: Die Nikomachische Ethik*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.

Dutch translation: Hupperts, C. & Poortman, B. 2005. *Aristoteles. Ethica Nicomachea*. Budel: Damon.

Alternative English translation: Rackham, H. 1926 (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), 1934 (rev. ed.), 1947. *Aristotle: The Nicomachen Ethics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard.

Chroust, A.-H. 1973. *Aristotle. New light on his life and on some of his works*. (vol. 1). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Hughes, G. J. 2001. *Aristotle on Ethics*. London: Routledge.

Knight, K. 2007. *Aristotelian Philosophy. Ethics and politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*. Cambridge, Malden: Polity.

Kraut, R. 2009. "Aristotle's Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed). forthcoming URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/aristotle-ethics/>. Accessed on 11.02.2009.

Richardson Lear, G. 2004. *Happy lives and the highest good. An Essay on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton.

Urmson, J. O. 1988. *Aristotle's Ethics*. New York, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

### 10.1.2. Sources which helped to form a background knowledge, but not explicitly referred to in the text

Ando, T. 1958 (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), 1971 (3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed.). *Aristotle's Theory of practical cognition*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Duvenage, P. 2000. Philosophike Martyria. Aristotle, Gadamer and the Relevance of Practical-Ethical Knowledge in a Multicultural Society. *Phronimon* (Special edition 2000), 95–110.

Engstrom, S. & Whiting, J. (eds). 1996, 2000 (reprint). *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics. Rethinking Happiness and Duty*. Cambridge, Melbourne: Cambridge.

Hardie, W. F. R. 1968. *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*. London: Oxford.

Monan, J. D. 1968. *Moral Knowledge and its Methodology in Aristotle*. London: Oxford.

Rauch, G. A. 2000. The Relationship between Ethics (Theory) and Morality (Practice). *Phronimon* (vol.2, 2000), 295–303.

Veatch, H. B. 1962. *Rational man. A Modern Interpretation of Aristotelian Ethics*. Bloomington, London: Indiana.