

The Concept of Phronesis by Aristotle and the Beginning of Hermeneutic Philosophy

Riccardo Dottori

Università di Roma "Tor Vergata"

Dipartimento di Ricerche Filosofiche

dottori@lettere.uniroma2.it

ABSTRACT

My paper shows how the concept of *phronesis* was the basis of Gadamer's thought, right from the beginning. In fact, the problem of the development of Aristotle's thought, and his outdistance of Plato and in his critique of the doctrine of ideas, takes place because of this concept. I would also refer to the first review of Jäger's book which is not set out on the discussion of the development of aristotelian *Metaphysics* on the basis of the doctrine of ideas, but on the basis of the critique of Good, of the True and the Right. Aristotle develops it in his First Book about *Nicomachean Ethics* and basically on the basis of the critique of the unity of knowing and acting, which constituted the central core of Plato's ethics.

0. In one of his last writings, Gadamer tells us about hermeneutics as both a theoretical and a practical task. This union of hermeneutic theory and hermeneutic practice is given by a concept which is also fundamental because of his thought, namely the concept of *phronesis*. It is translated into Latin with *prudentia*, from which comes *jurisprudencia*, whose task is to judge or to apply a law to a particular case: in German *jurisprudencia* is also said *Judikatur*. It isn't easy to translate it into English as there is not, as it often happens in relation to Greek language, an equivalent single term. In fact, we can translate it either with reasonableness, wisdom or judgment, where the last one doesn't simply mean the ability to judge but *being able* to judge. It is what we commonly mean in spoken language, or better in popular idiom when we talk about having sense. When Gadamer needed originally to translate this Greek concept of *phronesis*, which is a focal point of his first interest as philosopher and classical philologist, he used, as we know, the term *praktisches Wissen*, that corresponds to practical wisdom. This is also the title of one of his first and most brilliant essays, an essay dated 1930, which follows closely to his doctorate work and the work for his university teaching qualification, *Platos dialektische Ethik* (Plato's dialectical Ethic); the latter is dated 1929. The essay was published only in 1985, in the 5th volume of the edition of his works, which he himself saw through the press, and we'll mainly talk about this one. This work, however, had been anticipated by an essay, which is even older than the *Plato's dialectical Ethic*, as it is dated back to 1927, and which

was a review of the famous book of Walter Jäger, *Entstehungsgeschichte der Metaphysik*, edited in “Hermes”, III vol., 1927: *Der aristotelische Protreptikos und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der aristotelischen Ethik*.

All this shows how the concept of *phronesis* was the basis of all his thought, right from the beginning. In fact, the problem of the development of Aristotle’s thought, and his outdistance of Plato and in his critique of the doctrine of ideas, takes place because of this concept. The whole of this first review of Jäger’s book is not set out on the discussion of the development of Aristotelian *Metaphysics* on the basis of the doctrine of ideas, but on the basis of the critique of Good, of the True and the Right, which Aristotle develops in his First Book about *Nicomachean Ethics* and basically on the basis of the critique of the unity of knowing and acting, which constituted the central core of Plato’s Ethic. Gadamer himself confided me that he originally wanted to write his doctorate work on the Aristotelian Ethic and that this was why he planned in the first place to write an introduction to Plato’s Ethic, particularly on the *Philebus*, and that this “brilliant idea” led him to write his whole doctorate work on *Philebus*. We can find traces about his intentions in the same review of Jäger, GW, vol. 5, p. 173, in which Gadamer says clearly that one needs to take into account the *Philebus* for being able to determine the relation between the concept of *phronesis*, as it is worked out in the *Protreptic*, the consequent use of the term *Nicomachean Ethic* and the relation with Plato; this is repeated again further (p. 181), where Gadamer says that for following the development of the Aristotelian thought, and in particular of his *Ethic*, a consideration of the *Philebus* is determining. It shows us not only that this is what he tried to do with his doctorate work but also confirms that his original intent of the analysis of *Philebus* was determined by his interest in the terminological fixation of the concept of *phronesis*; that’s where the entire problem of the relationship between Aristotle and Plato takes place. In fact he thinks that it is because of the critique of Aristotle, that Plato was thinking again about the doctrine of ideas, not only because of the problem of being or the problem of truth in the *Sophist* and in the *Parmenides* but also in relation to the ethical problem, as he had thought it on the basis of the *Phedon* and the *Republic*. While ideas were originally conceived as principles both of the being and of the acting, as Jäger interpreted it, that is as values, so as to build a basis of a normative ethic, on the basis of the concept of measure and following the ideal of exactness of science and the unity of the theoretical and the practical knowledge, in the *Philebus* we’d have a dialectical ethic, focused on the concept of participation between genres, so that the *phronesis* (which is here seen as knowledge) mingles with the opposite principle of pleasure. The truth is that it is always measure, which is the determining principle of such a mix and therefore it is always the exactness of science, which establishes what the good in life is; but at the end we can see that also non-exact sciences enter into this mix (*pseudes kanòn*, see Gad., p. 177). However, this would prove

how the Aristotelian critique was not able to demolish the concept of Platonic metaphysics of ideas and how for Plato it still remains on his feet.

Gadamer's aim in this writing is however to prove to Jäger that it is not possible to maintain that the *Protreptic* represents a stage in the Aristotelian thought in which he still holds on to the Platonic concept of a normative ethic, in regard to his following position in *Nicomachean Ethics*, and how the *Eudemian Ethic* can't be hold for a crossing point between these two conceptions.

1. *Phronesis in Common Language: Terminological and Philosophical Fixation by Aristotle*

Gadamer in fact proves how *phronesis* can indistinctly mean both kinds of knowledge, the theoretical and the practical one and that only with the *Nicomachean Ethic* we have the terminological fixation as practical knowledge, which therefore means the separation of ethics from metaphysics. However, the thematic use of a term, which is given when it becomes the object of a particular treatment that distinguishes it, doesn't prevent it from being commonly used in it's more general and common sense, in fact Aristotle himself will use it often in this broader meaning, as it happens in the passages of the *Protreptic*, which we know through Giamblicus and other works. Only when the real ethical speculation starts and the human being is distinguished from the rest of the universe, because of the divine *nous* that is in him, he puts himself the question of his own behaviour, of what he must do as a man, which is distinguished from the rest of the universe and that's how the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge takes place. In the *Protreptic* we have therefore a non-terminological use of the term because, as it is an introductory work to philosophy: it doesn't require to distinguish or make the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge but it introduces to both the kinds of knowing.

It is however in the essay of 1930 that Gadamer develops his interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* in it's own meaning, which distinguishes itself from the Platonic meaning. The Platonic Socrates had been criticizing the Sophistic movement, which said that virtue consisted in knowledge and was therefore teachable as it was mostly was based on the concept of gain, and he had proved in the *Protagoras*, in the *Carmenides* and in the *Euthydemus* (we'd add also the *Theaetetus*) that the concept of gain can't be seen as the measure that the human being has or can have in his own acting, because the gain is simply the concept of measurable, of what can be measured in the view of a certain aim, which is always else than the one that searches the gain itself. The gain is always something, which remains outside

from him, and that needs to be searched and established each time and that changes always in the various cases; that's why there is a *logos* of it, that means it is expressible and calculable. But this kind of knowledge is just *techne*, which is teachable and it is not an ethic but a dianoethic virtue as it doesn't concern the exercise of knowledge that the individual puts forward for himself in view of his own aim, that means of his own profit even though it is that kind of profit, which depends always from somebody else or from an aim that is outside of it. It is in this sense that Plato can identify the gain with the good (*Rep.* I, 336 d) and that is enough for discharging Plato - who here identifies himself with Socrates - from the accusation of intellectualism; Gadamer objects, that in fact Socrates could even been accused of utilitarianism in the XIX century.

For Socrates, therefore, only that knowledge that concerns the gain searchable by the single individual for himself and not as simple knowledge, but as acting, can be called virtue. *Sophrosynes* means in fact to do one's own good. That's why it is knowledge, which is not comparable neither with the knowledge of technique nor with that one of science. It is knowledge, but the knowledge of oneself and as that it is not teachable, it is not a universally valid knowledge. When it becomes an objective knowledge, which is determinable by the gain, it ceases to be the knowledge of one owns good, which is a acting, the virtue.

After all Plato needs only to continue on his way, in this case the one of his own good (*oikeion agathon*), which is however also the common good or whatever is of gain for the entire community (*koine sympheron*); moreover, the aim of the Republic is to prove that there is no common good, without being the good of the city. Yet, is it on the way of the gain as it is, that Plato wants to arrive to the good or is the knowledge of good something that goes beyond not only of the gain but even the mathematic knowledge? The good of the *Republic* is announced to us as follows: that principle that holds all the universe, and on the basis of which men obtains his own gain settling not only in the order of the city but also in the order of life and cosmos.

In virtue of such knowledge of good, which exceeds even mathematic sciences, it is not possible anymore to give a difference between theoretical and practical science: the theoretic science is *sophia* and includes both. That's why the politician for the doctrine of the Republic, has to be a philosopher. Gadamer forgets here what he had unwind concerning the *Philebus*: Plato himself after the experiences he had made with the tyrant Dioniges, the youngster in Syracuse, was brought to look over again not only of the doctrine of ideas but his own ethical and political doctrines; at the beginning of the *Sophist*, in fact, they ask the Stranger of Elea if there the sophist, the politician and the philosopher are distinguished not only by the name but also by the thing.

In any case, Gadamer believes that Aristotle, when he criticizes the doctrine of good, has been breaking the unity of the theoretical knowledge and the practical knowledge; Thales could be seen as *sophos*, while Pericles couldn't be seen in the same way, but had to be seen as *phronimos*: not knowing but wise. While this adjective was obvious in common language, it wasn't the same for *phronesis*. It constituted a knowledge of a different kind than the theoretic knowledge, the *sophia*; *phronesis* is the practical knowledge which is typical of the politician as it is firstly the knowledge of the one who can perceive or pursue his own aim but which includes, just as it is, also the gain of the city. Therefore the citizen that chooses to be guided by a politician, does so because he believes that just as the latter is able to pursue his own gain, he'll be able to pursue the gain of the city. But the practical knowledge doesn't distinguish itself simply because it can pursue a gain and because it can see the right moment for a choice or a decision; if it was like this it wouldn't be different from the technical knowledge; in fact it would have its own measure in the simple gain, that means outside from itself. In this gain the good has to be comprehended; it has to be a knowledge of itself, which is knowledge of its own good, which it is capable to produce and not only to know; but being able to produce it, means to know it, just as knowing it means to produce it; is it not the same, however, with the technical knowledge? Or does this knowledge of oneself constitute it as a different kind of knowledge in respect to it?

2. The Distinction between Practical and Technical Knowledge

Actually, this distinction is common both to the 10th chapter of the *Protreptic*, and to the first and 6th chapter of *Nicomachean Ethics*; in both cases the distinction between the two kinds of knowledge is effectuated through the example of the knowledge of the carpenter, who enters in the place of the surveyor, which is the scientist that owns the measure and knows how to measure; that means that scientific exactness is different from technical exactness. In both cases the objects of the controversy are the Sophistic and the Rhetoric, which start from the simple knowledge of laws, which already exist and are based on the dispute on their usefulness and their possible mutation in view of usefulness. This critique to Sophistic, however, takes place in different ways in the two texts, the *Protreptic* and *Nicomachean Ethics*; the first one refers to the definitions, which serve to judging, to knowledge of nature and the thing, while the second refers to the experience, to being able to distinguish and to judge, which is the consequence of direct contact with things. While the *Protreptic* seems therefore to demand the knowledge of philosophy for political science and argues with the Sophistic, *Nicomachean Ethics* only insists on the impossibility to use a knowledge, which is entirely

theoretical, in the concrete situation of practical and political life. Gadamer, however, as mentioned, proves that Plato had already dealt with these problems in the dialogues of the last period (over all in the *Philebus*) and that therefore Aristotle couldn't ignore them, nor the answers that Plato himself had given or tried to give. In fact even in the *Protreptic* of Aristotle, we can find answers of this kind, that is that the pure science of ideas is not practicable. The positions of both the Aristotelian works wouldn't be too far from each other. In what consists, however, the true difference between the two kinds of knowledge in *Nicomachean Ethics*?

Gadamer dedicates a thorough and fascinating analysis to this distinction: but he uses themes of Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's philosophy of existence. As he himself told us — allow me another anecdote — Heidegger once held a private lesson for him in his house on the concept of *phronesis*. It was in the period, when he was elaborating *Being and time*, and how the concept of technical knowledge should bring him to the concept of *Zuhandenheit*, *to be on hand*, opposite to the *Vorhandenheit*, the simple being in front off ourselves of the theoretical knowledge. That's why the concept of *phronesis* would finish coinciding with the concept of *Sorge*, care, which includes also the concept of the individual, who is fully interested in his own existence of kierkegaardian memory. Thus, to the concept of *Worumwille*, which represents the *telos*, of the *Entschluss*, the decision, or of the *Entschlossenheit* and the *Entwurf*, corresponds the *orexis* and the *proairesis tou biou*, the fundamental decision of the own choice of life as the will of full realization of oneself: we can find them also in Gadamer's interpretation. All this lacks in theoretical knowledge, and can be learnt in an objective way by others, just as it possesses objective means, which can be borrowed and acquired and which, on the other hand, can't be given in the case of the practical knowledge concerning one's own existence. Moreover, in technical knowledge, which is represented by an art, that means a craft or a profession, one can decide to enter or not to enter, while one can't decide to enter into existence; it is not possible, in fact, to give an art of existence or a profession of existence — Gadamer brilliantly finally states — and certainly there are no tools for this profession (p. 241). Art, that means *techne*, is on its peak when it doesn't do anything of what *phronesis* does. Through learning, art tries to find ways to improve its own producing and that's why it can be learnt: but it's not possible to lean how to exist. *Phronesis* is therefore everybody's rational reflection on what is useful for himself, what serves for his life, the *eu zen*. That's why *phronesis* is the knowledge for itself what is good and it's practice, the *exis praktike*, that is the continuous practice of the practical knowledge, while techniqu is the *exis poietike*, the experience acquired while producing. Gadamer arrives to the point of even defining *phronesis* as die *Wachsamkeit der Sorge um sich selbst*, the watchfulness care for oneself, and this says really everything about Heidegger's and Gadamer's relation with *Nicomachean Ethics*.

3. Normative ethic?

Even as continuous exercise of the practical knowledge, *phronesis* doesn't lack of historicity; that's so not only because it is a continuous exercise, a *habitus* which needs to be acquired with time, the continuous practice, so that, as Aristotle say, *ethos* becomes *êthos*, custom, the moral law that people, a city, gave themselves and needs to be respected by the citizens. Are therefore ethics, which are implied in the *Protreptic* and are even more developed in *Eudemian Ethics*, normative ethics, compared to *Nicomachean Ethics*, which consist in practical knowledge, in *phronesis*? Gadamer proves again that both the kinds of ethic are on the same level, also seen from a methodological point of view and that only the tendency to formalization predominates in *Eudemian Ethics*; actually, they mean the same thing, because also *Nicomachean Ethics* are sciences of the principles, also because they want to show the primacy of the *oti*, of the fact "that things stand like this", that is necessary to start from the facticity of the reality. This doesn't mean that both the works rely on pure and simple empiricism; against this empiricism of juridical disputes of sophistic that can't really rise on the level of science but has it's basis on the validity of factual (nowadays: juridical positivism); both assert an authentic concept of experience, that concept from which a practical philosophy has to start from and only on which limit there is a authentic philosophical science of praxis.

This conversation about the factual can in fact generate the doubt of ethics being dependent from custom or historical laws that people and the city give themselves and which depend from the simple state of things. But in this case we'd have a knowledge, which is communicable, teachable and learnable by everybody and not anymore that practical knowledge, which is made essentially by wondering about what would be more useful, righter and lastly good and right form me, in my particular situation. We'd have, therefore, a positive normative ethic and its application would be only determined by ability and experience. But this, says Gadamer, is neither Aristotle nor Plato. It is true that Aristotle says that the human acting always takes into account the point of view of good; it is *êthos*, which outlines the direction for men's acting in the concrete forms of virtue (the *orexis*) and give him his own possibility of reflection on the right decision he has to take and on the right way and time; but the form of virtue human acting is directed to, is not the simple universal, which is given to him or that he finds prescribed but always a concrete way of acting of the single and unrepeatable situation. The knowledge or the practical sense that needs to take the decision concerning the various possibilities of its own way of behaving, determines his way to put

himself in respect of the universal norm: so it is him and not the norm, who determines the action. It is always the own reflection that determines his taking sides and the direction of his acting.

It is true, thou, that *logos* and *hexis*, virtue and reason are not the same thing; virtue is not simple knowledge, as Socrates wrongly thought; virtue is not a behaviour *kata ton logon*, following reason, but *meta ton orthon logon*, going along with reason. The direction that ethos prescribes to us, because of the upbringing, becomes a concrete behaviour only when it becomes the own conviction and the own engagement of mature men. Practical knowledge is this unitary phenomenon of reason and behaviour: the choice of action or the decision follows the purpose of the glance turned towards good. This choice, the *proairesis*, is both reason, *dianoia*, and desire, *orexis*: the concrete practical knowledge, *phronesis* is both knowing what is good for myself and motivation to action and practice of virtue. When love or passion takes over in the choice and in the decision, the reflection of the practical knowledge fails, and we fall out of the track of our moral behaviour: *phronesis*, the reasonableness – Gadamer concludes – is only possible as *sophrosyne*, wisdom. In fact, ethos is not fundamentally determined by knowledge but by the continuous and constant exercise of virtue, it is a mental habit, which *almost* becomes use.

As matters stand, we could wonder why, after having written a dissertation and a work for his university teaching qualification on Plato's dialectical ethics, that is his commentary on *Philebus*, Gadamer didn't go ahead writing the work about *Nicomachean Ethics* he was originally projecting or in general about Aristotelian Ethics. Concerning his original plan, we only have a work of 1930 on the *practical knowledge*, a writing that should have been edited in a volume in honour of Paul Friedländer, which wasn't published. Actually it wasn't more than an introduction to a true work on Aristotelian ethics even though it is a very valuable work, that wants discuss, as we have previously seen, the relation between Platonic and Aristotelian Ethics, between theoretical and practical knowledge.

Gadamer didn't produce any more valuable work until *Truth and Method* and the following works on Hegel's dialectic. This means, however, that the concept of *phronesis* remains the constant theme of his thought and that hermeneutical philosophy was only the development of this theme. This is proved by the imprint this theme let on some conferences he hold in Lovanio in 1956, which were later published in French under the title *The Problem of Historical Consciousness*; Gadamer had lost the original German text and had to publish the French translation he had used for his lessons; the German version was edited only in 1985 on the basis of a new translation from French. On this conference or on this chapter of historical consciousness, also a chapter of *Truth and Method* is based, "The Hermeneutical Relevance of Aristotle", which is about his concept of *phronesis*. Therefore *Nicomachean Ethics* would be not only on the basis of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which Volpi calls a

German translation of this work, but also the fundamental thesis of *Truth and Method*.

This is proved by later work, which we started speaking about, mentioning them at the beginning, in particular in “Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task”. Hermeneutics are therefore possible only on the basis of *phronesis*, it is the reality of *phronesis*. This means: interpretation is both a theoretical and a practical task; that is: to truly know is to translate and to translate is an ethical task; Aristotle himself believed *sophia* to be a practical virtue, just as the determination of right acting, of *praxis*, which is the result of a *proairesis*, of a choice, depends on the other hand from *phronesis*, from reasonableness. What really matters is to distinguish the authentic *praxis*, the ethical acting, from the *poiesis*, that is a doing, which is the result of knowing, in this case of *techne*, the knowledge of how things need to be done, which is however not the knowledge of the purpose or of the reason *why* they need to be done; that’s why Gadamer rightly insists that the practical knowledge is the knowledge of *oti*. In this sense the *praxis*, even though it is sent to reasonableness, can never completely depend on a theory, that means: it is not, like technique, the application of a theory. We could also more precisely say, that the reasonableness of *phronesis*, or of *prudentia*, is not the technical rationality, nor the rationality of the critical rationalism, just as the *sophia* towards the good is not a doctrine. We could also use the term ‘competence’, which is nowadays so very fashionable, for this reasonableness, which constitutes also the principle of the application of universal on particular, or of the subsumption of particular under the universal. For the translation of *Kunstlehre*, competence is sometimes the only suitable term, which is also used by Gadamer for designate the hermeneutic practice.

Hermeneutics is actually more a practice, than a technique, as it is not the simple application of the rules of a method, which is liable to controls, but consist first of all in being able to choose the right aim, the *scopus* on which basis a text has to be interpreted or in being able to catch in the other what he wants to say or wants us to understand, also, therefore, the *scopus* of the other, when he want to get in touch with us. There isn’t therefore a *doctrine* that is put before the hermeneutic experience but rather a competence, in the meaning of “being able to do”, being able of putting ourselves in contact with the other; the hermeneutic practice consists in this *art* of understanding, just as rhetoric is the art of persuasion. In both cases there is therefore an art that we could learn, a *Kunstlehre*, but, just as in the case of linguistic competence, it’s the possession of rules that are applied spontaneously; as they tend to the understanding and to establish an authentic contact with the other, they can’t be simply put under the control of the right application like the rules of a certain method, simply because the application of these rules is not the simple reproduction of knowledge but the production of new understanding. The

same principle is valid for the interpretative relationship as well as the social relationship: in the first place basic rules of the ethic relation have to be accepted so that there can be understanding. The truth, and we mean the truth that concerns us humans, meant not as inhabitants of the world – because also the animals are likewise – but as inhabitants of the polis, as members of the human community, is not matter of simple knowledge and doesn't rise on the basis of knowledge but of knowing how to behave; this is necessary so that there can be a society.

But, what's about the truth searched by the philosophy of Plato and then by Aristotle, that philosophy that concerned the integration of men into universe? Here Gadamer follows Plato closer than he does with Aristotle: no logos that could be pronounceable, expressible, can catch the last reason of universe; only by reviewing again and again all the possible opinions or alternatives, in the common discussion of men that are willing to understand each other, we're suddenly struck by truth, by an answer that lies in the most beautiful place of our soul, which is ours and can't be imposed to anybody else: which of course doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.