#982

DEAN'S LECTURE

The Forgotten Faculty:

The Place of *Phronêsis* or Practical Sense in Liberal Education

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Santa Fe

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Great Hall

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The Forgotten Faculty:
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(Plutarch and Aristotle)[1]

"We think in generalities;
we live in details."
Airport terminal display

"Reading maketh a full man,
Conference a ready man,
And Writing an exact man."
Francis Bacon

"Would a new Plutarch
even be possible [today]?"
Nietzsche[2]

1. Prologue in Seminar:

"Educations tailored to each person
are better than those given in common."
Aristotle[3]

To everyone: **Welcome**! To our new freshmen: a special **Welcome**!

The title of tonight's talk, ***The Forgotten Faculty***, is ambiguous, deliberately so. One might have anticipated a talk on the role of the teaching faculty in modern higher education, in particular the regrettable **subordination** of the teaching function to other lesser ends in today's universities, thereby distorting its proper role. Important though that is, this is not my intention.

Indeed, it is our good fortune at St. John's that the faculty is not forgotten but rightly understood to be at the very **heart** of the college, the ministers and stewards of what we call the Program. We, the tutors, are not content with imparting bare skills and empty generalizations, not satisfied with conveying the results of our own or others' thinking without requiring that **you** develop **your own** capacities for such thoughtfulness. We have learned from Plato's ***Meno*** that lecturing and learning are **not correlates** like throwing and catching. We thus don't lecture or 'talk down' (*katagorein*) to you. As a result it is the question, and not some answer, in our view that is the proper instrument of education. We begin each class accordingly.

Last night your seminars began with a question. Perhaps at that moment, or perhaps somewhat later in the evening, a member of the seminar, a tutor or fellow student asked a question or made a remark that "spoke to you," that is that seemed "tailor made" just for **your** learning, that bore on **your** perplexity, **your** state of understanding then and there. In "speaking to you" it spurred you to further reflection. It somehow enabled you to step over your settled or

unexamined view and opened up a horizon of possibility hitherto unforeseen. All of a sudden you were engaged as never before; you were propelled forward; you had an investment in jointly finding out where it all led. You were on your way to discovery. In short, you were actively engaged in that joint enterprise we call a **conversation**.

The question or remark that prompted all this was not so much leading as **opening**, not a disguised commentary but an **invitation to exploration**. It didn't necessarily provide the missing link of an incomplete thought process but, rather, made you think about how you had been thinking and in so doing cleared the way for discovery, **or** it offered for consideration something that opened a window of unsuspected prospects. Such remarks or questions may have been coincidental, but they may also have been a **tailor-made** question that artfully and with foresight made for greater thoughtfulness. How is this possible?

To help us see what was going on there we need to take a bit of a detour with the help of two authors on the program, Aristotle and Plutarch.

2. "Human Beings Like to Talk...:"

"They fought their countries battles and conducted their campaigns in their talk."
Pyrrhus I 531[4]

Now, Aristotle is not an especially funny man. But there is a remark in the ***Nicomachean Ethics***—a book freshmen will spend long hours studying this spring—that makes me smile at least, one that suggests a very wry and penetrating way of looking at the world, in particular at human life and our foibles and pretensions. He observes that human beings like to "talk," in particular we like to talk about **human excellence or virtue** (*areté*) (we do?). Indeed by so "philosophizing," we think we are being "serious human beings" (*spoudaios*).[5]

We all recognize this tendency to speak more loudly with words than with deeds, to posture without actually being effective, to "philosophize" and "pontificate" in the worst senses of those terms (as well as to second guess, to play Monday morning quarterback, to presume to know what one should have done "if I were only there," in short the joys of the barbershop or coffee shop conversation etc).

There is much in Aristotle's wry remark, but minimally he is seeking to **redirect his reader** ("transpose them," Heidegger), and this in a decisive way, to get us to see that the "truth" of such reflections and discussions—of what has come to be called "ethics"—is **not** to be found in the talking, and surely **not** in a "theory," but can only be in the **life lived** and the numerous individual deeds out of which a **life** is made. "Human beings like to talk..." to be sure, but he, and **we**, are interested in much more than just talk.

So let us turn tonight to someone who sought to look carefully at "lives," the writer of ***Lives of the Illustrious Greeks and Romans***, the first century political philosopher **Plutarch**. There we see men of action who are often also thinkers and who are distinguished by their judgment as much as by their actions. They lived their lives one insight at a time—as we all do—yet of such quality that their actions are not a staccato series of separate events, but reflect and have their source in a more developed faculty. These are men who are not content to just talk but to act and live fully, if not also well.

3. Much More than History:

"Antony was so great that he was thought by others
worthy of higher things than his own desires."
Comparison of Demetrius and Antony II 535

There is also another reason that we should turn to Plutarch. I was walking out of the bookstore last fall and about to turn into the coffee shop, when I overheard a sophomore say to a friend, somewhat puzzled and maybe even a little exasperated, "Why are we reading Plutarch? It's **only** history." At that point, turning around, I interjected the enthusiastic remark of Rousseau (actually he was quoting Montaigne at the time), and I quote, "**Plutarch, he's my man.**" (*"C'est mon homme que Plutarque"*),[6] hoping thereby to encourage a reconsideration. I don't know if it helped but it did spur **me** to undertake a course of reading this past year from which I tried to answer this question and understand the **enthusiasm** for Plutarch on the part of so many of our program authors. For these authors—and they number not a few,[7] including, in addition to Montaigne and Rousseau, Shakespeare, Montesquieu, most of the founders of our country (Franklin, Madison, Jefferson), Emerson, Nietzsche, Tolstoi et al—for them he is not "just history" but much more, a teacher of a higher order.[8]

Though I read all of Plutarch's *Lives*—all 1,451 pages!—I have to admit that for most of these, it was only a first reading and in general this is a new arena of exploration for me. Nevertheless, **drawn by the question**, I ventured forth. Now here I am before all of you, presenting my first formulations for your consideration [I 27]. As in seminar, I trust that I am among friends, friends who help each other to think better, more precisely and deeper, about one another's first or nascent thoughts. Thus this dean's lecture, my "annual essay" if you will, is indeed an **essay**, an attempt, a first effort of discovery with all the attendant uncertainty that such a venture always entails—as many of you know well from **your own** efforts of discovery. Thus your generosity and forbearance will be called upon this evening.

In reading Plutarch we are invited to reenter[9] the realm of the city, of the "political" (*politike*) in its original meaning: the realm of the probable and the unlikely, of the inadvertent and the deliberate, the unpredictable as well as of "signs and auguries," of strife [II 42] and harmony, fortune and misfortune, good and bad [II 104] (where "things can be otherwise" [Aristotle]); we reenter, in short, **the world in which we actually live our lives,** "worthy of memory" Plutarch would say [I 49, 100, 583, II 61], indeed worthy of our deepest consideration.

Here not everything is easily seen. With some things we need assistance, a magnifying glass if you will, in order for them to be brought to fuller view. Plutarch helps us to experience the contest, travails, and challenges of the soul by portraying it **writ large,**[10] so to speak, in the public arena, on the world stage and the field of battle. Along side of the virtues—moderation, justice, courage, prudence—we experience the **encompassing, worldly context** in which virtue fights to raise its head and become **effective**: jealousy, fear, ambition; ...betrayal, flattery, avarice, cultural decline, and ambition; ...privilege, shame, superstition, hatred, rivalry, and ambition; ...avarice, disillusionment, panic, self-interest, and ...ambition.[11] Here we are given an opportunity to reflect on the distinctive features of **lives lived**, their relative effectiveness, their weighty consequences, and their manifold difficulties.

In reading Plutarch we experience the complexity of the attempt to give an order to human life in the city with Lycurgus and Numa Pomplius; the precariousness of virtue with Themistocles, Aristides and Marcus Cato; the havoc of tyrannical ambition with Pyrrhus and Lysander; the limited effectiveness of justice with Luccullus; the disasters consequent upon

excessive caution with Nicias and Crassus. We experience also the lamentable loss of prudence with Pompey; the ineffectiveness of absolutist principles with Cato the Younger; the transformation of excessive tenderness into its opposite with Alexander; the futility of virtue undermined by life's circumstances with Phocion; the unbridled desire for glory with Agis; the suspect powers of eloquence with Demosthenes and Cicero; and, of course, the dominion of passion trumping all else with Antony.

Amidst these abundant and luxurious life stories—"histories" he sometimes calls them—are observations perhaps **neither** bound **nor** diminished by time: We are encouraged to reflect on "the ages of man," the causes of political change, on statesmanship as the "art of the possible;" the political force of character and example (*paradeigma*), the ambiguity of greatness and the liabilities of success. We are asked to reflect as well on the fate of youthful optimism; the clash of virtue and misfortune, the psycho-dynamics of human failings; on self-transformation forced by rude experience, the absolutist language of the passions, the self-justifying linguistic universes of the vices; on the pathological strategies of ambition, and the moral intractability of wealth. These, and many more, are indeed "worthy of memory."

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Before we proceed, one further remark. In presenting Plutarch's mature reflections, we are reminded of Aristotle's concern about young people:[12] **young people, he says profoundly, are, well, ...young**. And this presents a difficulty. Because young people **lack life experience,** he says, they do **not** make good observers and students of "politics," that is do not make good students of their **own** lives in the city, in the *polis*.

Here Aristotle does not mean to be insulting, only honest. For experience can only be one's own. It cannot be taught, and surely not borrowed nor poured from one person into another. It requires **time and judgment**. Thus for Aristotle, there is no alternative to "growing up," to overcoming isolating adolescence and becoming a person of experience, "mature." So it falls to us during our period of personal transformation at the college (beginning this evening) to resolve to overcome this lack, through careful reading [I 201] and greater thoughtfulness, that we might be "strengthened by [such] experiences [I 646]," made better students of our own lives in the *polis* and better able navigate its often bewildering seas.

4. The Liberal Art of Life Writing:

"Everyone has faults; not everyone has virtues."
Goethe

"It is in bagatelles that nature comes to light."
Rousseau

At various moments throughout his work, Plutarch steps back and reflects on the activity of writing lives. On the first such occasion, what strikes him above all is the **benefit to himself** of such exercises:

> It is for the sake of others that I **first** commenced writing [what he here calls] biographies [he says, yet] I find myself...attaching myself to it **for my own [sake]**; the [excellences] virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of **looking-glass** [or mirror] in which I may see how to adjust and adorn **my own life.** Indeed it can be compared to nothing but daily living and **associating together**; we...entertain each successive **guest**, view their 'stature and their

> qualities,' and **select** from their actions all that is noblest and worthiest to know... [*Timoleon* I 325].

"What more effective means to one's [own] improvement [than associating with what is excellent is there]?" he wonders. He then elaborates: "My method in the study of history, is...by the familiarity acquired in writing, **to habituate my memory to receive and retain images of the best and worthiest of characters [2x]**. I thus am enabled to **free myself** from any ignoble, base, or vicious impressions...by the **remedy** of turning my thoughts....to these noble examples."

What is striking about this passage is that for Plutarch this kind of **writing** is first of all **a liberating** (and hence a **liberal**) **activity**, freeing and enabling him to shape himself as he seeks to give shape to the lives of others. He here draws on two ancient nomic principles:[13] 1) that *we become like those we **associate** with.* This he extends to writing and books: we become like that about which we think and like those from whom we choose to learn.[14] And 2) its correlate, *we are moved to imitate what we admire*,[15] or the principle of **emulation**. "The mere sight of a conscpicuous example of excellence," he says, immediately [*euthus*] brings one to **admiration** (*thaumazesthai*) and therewith brings one to **imitate** the doer. Indeed for Plutarch there is nothing like the "living example" of human character [I 99].[16] **The beautiful,**[17] he says, **moves one to action towards it** (*to kalon eph'hauto praktikos kinei kai praktiken euthus hormen entithesin.*) [*Pericles* I 202; ii 2-3] [**2x**].[18] As a result he "thought fit to spend his time and pains" associating with these illustrious Greek and Roman "guests" for the benefit both of himself and us.

–Let us note, especially for our work here at the college, the **many rewards** of writing that reach **beyond** the final product. Writing can be an occasion for self-discovery and self-improvement. It is the process, after all, that is enabling.[19]—

Later he compares writing lives to **portrait painting**. He says, we first must do "honor" [cp. II 245] to our subject and that means, in the case of human beings, to capture "the stature and qualities" of the person and not be content with external likenesses (the mere "face"). Yet there is a question of judgment here. He writes:

> ...As we would wish that a painter who is to draw a beautiful face, in which there is yet imperfection, should neither wholly leave out, nor yet too pointedly express what is defective, because this would deform it[20]...so it is hard, or indeed perhaps impossible, to show **the life of a man** wholly free from blemish...[He then adds:] ...any lapses or faults that occur, through human passion or political necessity, we may [generously] regard...as the shortcoming of some particular [excellence] virtue, than as a natural effect of vice...[and this] out of a tender[ness] [*aidoumenous*: respect] to the weakness of nature... [*Cimon* I 643-4].

Conspicuous in this reflection is **a different principle of care** from what we are accustomed to. It judiciously abstains from journalistic realism, and above all from that sensationalism by which we are daily overwhelmed by our media. It seeks rather a measured rendering of a whole life, without at the same time ignoring or exaggerating the negative (see I 699, II 285, 394). Discretion, in this view, is the better part of realism: discriminating, weighing, focusing, estimating [II 394], selecting [II 445], and finally diagnosing[21] [I 699].

On yet another occasion he forewarns his readers that he is **not**—as we might first think and as he himself sometimes says—**an historian**, "collecting mere useless pieces of learning [I 699]," but rather seeks to "**epitomize**" the lives of his subjects.

> It must be borne in mind [he says] that **my design is <u>not</u> to write histories, but lives**. [**2x**] [For] the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of [excellence and deficiency] virtue and vice in men; sometimes a matter of **less** moment, an expression **or** [even] a jest informs us better of the character and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles.... Therefore, as portrait-painters are **more exact** in the lines and features of the face, in which the **character** is seen, than in the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to **the marks and indications of the souls of men...**[*Alexander* II 139].[22]

"So I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men." The outside of a human being reveals **the fullness** of the inside, more than we might think. Little things, after all, are not any the less significant for their being little or not at first sight obvious, only harder to discern.

It thus falls to us as readers of Plutarch to seek to **emulate his perspicacity,** to attend to the fullness of being he presents to us. That this might require that **we** not be unduly taken by the great and the eventful (and "what is done publicly in open day" [I 469]) in favor of the private, and the small means that we too must resist our own inherited tendency to look at things from an historical perspective[23] [see also I 698]). Plutarch's **psychographic art,** then, entails **a different kind of insight,** one that sees past the obviousness of "weighty matters" to the telling marks, however small, that bespeak and "epitomize" a soul.[24]

<u>5. "A Subtle Logic of Discrimination:"</u>

"It works in practice
but unfortunately not in theory."
French Diplomat[25]

Plutarch relates this story about Caesar:

> ...Seeing some wealthy strangers at Rome, carrying...puppy-dogs...embracing and making much of them, [he] took occasion not unnaturally to ask whether women in this country were unused to bearing children." [He then comments:] ...By th[is] prince-like[26] [that is, indirect] reprimand [Caesar] gravely reflect[ed] upon persons who...lavish upon beasts that affection and kindness which nature has implanted in us to be bestowed on those of our **own kind**" [*Pericles* I 201].

While we may not particularly like this example—we may ourselves have puppy-dogs—Caesar's and Plutarch's intent can be made plain otherwise: human beings do not always attend to what serves them best, indeed what **nature** would have them do.

"With like reason," Plutarch says, "may **we** blame those who **misuse the love of inquiry and observation [2x]** which nature has implanted in our souls, by expending it on objects **unworthy** of the attention either of their eyes or their ears, while they **disregard** such as are excellent in themselves and would do them good." We can misdirect our attention to unworthy objects. We can even **misuse** our love of inquiry, philosophy. He continues, whereas

> ...the mere outward sense, being passive..., perhaps cannot help taking notice of everything...be it...useful or unuseful; in the exercise of his **mental perception** every man...has a **natural power** to turn himself...to what he judges desirable.

> Therefore it becomes a man's duty to pursue...the best and choicest of everything, that he may not only employ his contemplation but may also be improved by it.... A man ought [then] to apply his **intellectual perception** to such objects as...are apt to call it forth and allure it to **its own proper good**.

We see here a suspicion of abstract speculation, of that theorizing that takes us away to the remote reaches of thought—the "clouds," in Aristophanes' image—"mere theory," as we and Plutarch sometimes say [*Dion* II 543]—and away from the things that bear most on our lives. We have control over that to which we apply our "intellectual perception," yet paradoxically, in Plutarch's view, we do not always apply ourselves well to what would do us the most good. "We find such objects," as we have seen, "in **the works of excellence** (*aretes ergois*)," he says, "which also produce in the mind [even] of mere **readers**...an emulation and eagerness that may lead them on to imitation...." No less than life experience, reading provides such formative examples (1179b8-11).

Understandably wary, Plutarch is not condemning philosophy here (as some might [see I 476][27]). On the contrary, he seeks rather to focus his philosophic attention, and therewith **to redirect ours**, back onto its "worthy and proper objects."[28] In being so constrained, philosophy remains no less indispensable to the perfection of human life: How else can one find one's bearings amidst the turbulence and tides of fortune but through that **human insight** that enables us, amidst it all, to be thoughtful, farsighted, circumspect, principled, and steady? This he brings us to see repeatedly [I 329, 336, ...].

Thus as we read Plutarch's accounts, the reader is brought to a **new manner and degree of acuity**, to a new sensitivity to the rich complexity of human things, ordinary and extraordinary. Each life is different. Each figure vigorously seeks to make a life of distinction out of circumstances that are, well, never quite "tailor made," but rather challenging, threatening, and over the course of a career, hard to sustain. Each "story" is treated, not abstractly, but with the attention to detail that brings forth what is original and properly its own. The **active judgment and skills** necessary to live such lives of **distinction**—and to write about them—is exemplary.

The higher degree of acuity aspired to is revealed in a reflection on two of his subjects:

> Phocion and [Cato] may be well compared together [he says]...for assuredly there is **difference enough among virtues of the same denomination**, as between the bravery of Alcibiades and that of Epaminondas, the prudence of Themistocles and that of Aristides, the justice of Numa and that of Agesilaus.... The mixture both of [leniency] lenity on the one hand, with austerity on the other; their boldness on some occasions, and caution on others; their extreme solicitude for the public [etc...] so that we should need **a very nice and subtle logic of discrimination** to detect and establish the distinctions between them [2x] [*Phocion* II 247].

Plutarch's *Lives* are such gold mines of subtle distinctions. They actively attempt to **flesh out** the overly broad categories of abstract "theories of ethics" and, to be sure, that of the natural generality of language.[29] Plutarch paints his characterological studies with a subtlety of observation known to us from playwrights and novelists, embedding each in their life circumstances, rich in variables and innumerable vectors. In this regard the *Lives* need to be seen as a necessary **complement**[30] to our tradition of theoretical accounts of "ethics," allowing us to consider the fate of the effort of virtue **in the world**, to consider the formative importance of

circumstance, the variety of courses of development, and the real consequences of personal decisions, however large or small. This, he was concerned, was what the liberal arts did **not** teach often enough [II 440]. Moreover, we have seen in Plutarch's own artful approach to writing a different sort of touch, one that is properly self-interested, discreet, measured, judicious, and self-reflective.

All this brought me to wonder whether there wasn't a different "sensibility" evidenced here or more precisely, I would venture, a **different faculty of discernment** at work. It is not just that we have here a different line of sight. Rather there seems to be evidenced **another rational excellence,** one that has its distinction in revealing the richness of the particular as opposed to the breadth of generality, that allows us to focus on the life lived as opposed to the one that is, as we have come to say somewhat emptily, "ideal."

6. Phronêsis:

"It is not possible to understand *phronêsis* and *sophia*
under the guiding line of the Kantian distinction
between practical and theoretical reason."
Heidegger[31]

We are thus presented with a paradox of sorts: we are asked to consider a mode of thoughtfulness that is **not** speculative (1141b1), yet is deeply rational, that is **not** as "profound" [1141a21; II 181] as theoretical wisdom, perhaps, yet is **more important for human life** (1140b30).

Aristotle may be of help in considering this paradox. In the middle of his account of the process of shaping human character—Chapter VI of ***The Nicomachean Ethics***—we find an extended reflection on our possibilities for thoughtfulness. He looks first at the various objects available and concludes that there is not just one faculty, not one "reason," but **multiple modes of truth,** artful know-how, deductive knowledge or science, wisdom among them. In addition he introduces us to another active condition (*hexis*)[32] that may be unfamiliar to us, however one that proves to be **distinctively human: *phronêsis.***[33]

Let us step back. Aristotle does not think like we do.[34] We see this in his very different understanding of "choice," a concept especially important to us today. Choice, according to Aristotle, is not just some "personal preference" we willingly stick with. In his view "...without **intellect** and thinking [and] without an **active condition of character** (1139a33-4; also 1145a4f)," choice is nothing but blind self-insistence. Moreover, we tend to focus on choice in the abstract, either on the intention or the outcome by itself. But for Aristotle choice is part of an **integrated event** "...since [with] action there is no such thing as doing well or the opposite without thinking or [without] character." We will see in a bit why this must be so.

He begins his exploration of this special capacity by asking us first to consider **what sorts of people** we say have "good sense." Preserved in our languages is a recognition of a unique mode of insight evident in persons whose perspective on human things, people and circumstances, is particularly sound. A person of "singular judgment," we might say: a wise grandfather, a seasoned friend, a native truth teller, a parent, people in short who have taken their long experience and made it bear on their and others' lives. He puts it this way: people who are "...able to deliberate beautifully about things that are good and advantageous **for [themselves]** (1140a23-4)," those also who know what is "...conducive to living well **as a whole.**" We look to people who are not necessarily concerned to know things "in general" but rather to those whose

life experience has been brought to bear on their **own** lives, and equally, those who are not shortsighted but seek to see how each particular event and act might contribute to one's **overall** good.

This focus on the particularity of events and actions brings Aristotle to point out the obvious yet for us surprising conclusion, namely that "...there is **no [necessary] demonstration** of these things, since all of them are capable of being otherwise (a31-4).[35]" Nevertheless, despite being indemonstrable, Aristotle is emphatic that these things are **not** therefore untrue. That they are not matters of theoretical knowledge does not invalidate them, does not make them, as we might say, matters of "mere opinion," and surely not "merely relative." (Their truth therefore is **not** to be dismissed as merely mundane, merely demotic, or merely ontic.[36]) Our question thus becomes, if not knowledge per se, what faculty is at work discerning what is to be done?

Here Aristotle introduces ***phronêsis***, a faculty difficult to translate, rendered variously as practical sense, practical judgment, practical intellect, particular reason (Thomas), circumspection (Heidegger), prudence, and indeed sometimes practical wisdom. "[Practical sense, he says]...is a **truth-disclosing active condition** (*hexis alethe meta logou pratike)* involving **reason** that governs **actions**, concerned with what is good and bad for human beings (1140b3, also b20).[37] [2x]" This will take some explaining.

Phronêsis or practical sense differs from those other faculties that have to do with "what is everlasting" in that it is of "...the part of the soul concerned with **opinions**," that is with the world of change we live in, the world Plutarch invited us to consider seriously. Though concerned with opinion, it is not some mere thought that Aristotle is looking at but something "far more deeply interfused" (Wordsworth). He brings us to see this by observing that such a developed capacity is not something one can "forget."[38] While we might forget one of the zillion Greek forms or a proposition in Euclid—not a good idea—we are speaking of a different kind of thing, a **state of being of the soul**, a developed state of readiness, of incipient action. And like riding a horse or mastering a craft, he points out that, while it can be perfected, once possessed we can't "lose" it.[39] We always thereafter somehow have it.[40]

Indeed we even think we see this deeper resource in other animals. Concerning other species, Aristotle observes "...that that which discerns **well** the things that concern **itself** is possessed of [a kind of] 'practical sense' (a25)." Animals are said to have such a sense of what is best for them. We mean thereby that they have a "...capacity for foresight about their own lives," that is act in such a way that they do not justly blindly react to some present stimulus but in a way that secures their overall good. By contrast, Aristotle gives the embarrassing human example of the early Greek philosophers Thales and Anaxagoras about whom people unfortunately said that they were "...**wise but <u>not</u> possessed of practical sense** (b3f.)." He here highlights the paradox of the overly theoretical man, who knows divine things perhaps but not his own good.

In so doing Aristotle puts the man of practical sense into further relief: "...one who is a good deliberator simply is one who, by his **reasoning**, is **apt to hit upon** what is best for a human being among actions (b12-3)," he says; such a person responds not to the demands of a syllogism but to that of circumstance, and their reasoning ends, not in some abstract proposition, but with action. Plainly this entails a different kind of reasoning: one that "is **not only** about what is universal but [also] needs to discern the **particulars** [in their difference] as well...since action is [finally] concerned with particulars (b15),"[41] he says.

Practical sense is thus that unique faculty that is able to integrate particulars, this, that, and the other this and that into a larger outlook that leads to action.[42] Again contrasting the theoretical man, he points out that "...those who have **experience** are **more adept at action** than those with knowledge [alone] (b17)." That's why we admire our grandfather or friend; because they have done things that show that they have **learned** the lessons of life and can turn them to account to what one should do next. Experience with particulars, Aristotle emphasizes here, is the more valuable in this regard.[43]

Indeed it is this **same capacity** to deal with particulars, he notes, that is also at work on the world stage—brought so vividly to view in Plutarch—as in our own efforts to live well. "...The political art is **the same active condition** as practical sense (b22f)." The ability requisite to craft a specific political decree—not a general law but a specific mandate—must have in view "an action to be performed as an ultimate particular thing" (cp. 1137b11-32). So just as the artisan crafting a chair, just as our own efforts to do the right thing in given circumstances, the lawmaker is not well served by generalities alone but must think the circumstances through to a specific recommendation. This too, according to Aristotle, is a **species** of knowledge.

But of what sort? Aristotle sees a kind of **middle** between art and wisdom. While "...it is clear that practical sense is not knowledge [in the sense of science], for it is directed to an ultimate particular (a22)," Aristotle is emphatic that "...knowing what pertains to oneself [and knowing what one should do in a particular circumstance] is [yet] a species of knowledge (b33)."

At this point Aristotle notes something of interest. Practical sense, he observes, would seem to focus on

> ...the opposite extreme from the intellect [*nous*], for intellect is directed at **ultimate terms** of which there is no articulation, while practical sense is directed at the **ultimate particular** of which there is no knowledge [technically speaking] but only [simple] **perception** [*aisthesis*]—not the perception of the separate senses, but the sort of ["intellectual perception" (I 201)] by which we perceive that the ultimate figure in mathematics is a triangle... (1142a22-30).[44]

Surprisingly the example that Aristotle gives to highlight the particular mode of insight that is practical sense comes from **geometry**. We "see" that the smallest figure into which a geometrical plane figure can be divided is a triangle. We see it. He thus asks us to consider another mode of access to things in their completeness as wholes that he also calls "perception," though of particulars that are sensible only to the mind's "eye," an **intellectual perception**, if you will.[45]

7. "An Eye Sharpened by Experience:"

"The manner of forming one's ideas is
what gives character to the human mind."
Rousseau[46]

Before we proceed, let us step back for a moment and look at the requirements of responsible action. In the earlier chapters, Aristotle was at pains to point out that to act well requires a great deal of thought **and** experience. It requires that we somehow have a world of things in mind all at once, as the rightness of any action "...results from what is beneficial in the end **for which**, the means **by which,** and the time **in which** it ought to occur (1142b28)."[47] Action is through and through specific and circumstantial, responsive to the many vectors that need to be factored into consideration in order for some appropriate good to be accomplished.

Thus our question: what kind of thinking can integrate such particularity in its particularity? Other than a name, we may still be hard pressed to see what it precisely is, to identify it in its own right. Aristotle thus turns to other **like-seeming** faculties to contrast and therewith to delimit it. For example, one might think that what we are talking about is someone who is **skilled at thinking things through** (*angchinoia;* 1142b14f). While there is some overlap here, Aristotle at this point says something by way of contrast that, if not shocking, may at first make no sense to us as a reply. He says: "...**someone who lacks self-restraint or someone of bad character will...deliberate badly**" [2x]. He does so first that we might see that we are not looking just for some "mental agility." Rather we seek its source. Surprising though it may be, one's thinking, he suggests here, **is** deeply dependent on one's character. He therewith challenges us to make a connection between things where nowadays we see no connection.

Might we mean by "practical sense" a kind of **astuteness of judgment** (*sunesis*, or sagacity), then? Yet "...practical sense is something that [also] imposes **obligations**, since the end that belongs to it is what one ought or ought not to **do** (1143a7-10)." And astuteness is satisfied to identify distinctions ("mere theory" [II 543]). Perhaps then we mean another form of thoughtfulness, "...the right discrimination of what is decent," **considerateness** (*sungnome*), if you will? All these various examples—skilled thinking, astuteness, considerateness, practical sense—cconverge for Aristotle to the same meaning: "All these capacities are directed at things that are ultimate **[as well as]** particular.... All actions are among the things that are particular **and** universal (a27-30),"[48] and this requires a different and separate faculty to apprehend (1139a9-11).

This brings Aristotle back to his earlier observation about the similarity of theoretical intellect and practical sense. He now sees that it is the **same** fundamental activity, though differently directed, that is at work in **both** universal and particular knowledge. For Aristotle, thought, whether theoretical or practical, is always rooted in specific experiences and it is intellect, we now learn, that allows us to apprehend these specific beginnings. "Intellect [*nous*]," he observes, "is **directed to what is ultimate** on **both** sides, since it is intellect and **not** reason [or speech, *ou logou*] that is directed at both the first terms **and** the ultimate particulars" (1143b1-6)[49] [2x]. On the one side, intellect discerns the ultimate, first terms of logical demonstration. And on the other, the very same faculty, in thinking about action, sees the other sort of "premise," the ultimate, if variable, particular. "Of these [particulars]," he says, "one must have a perception and **this [ultimate] perception** [*aisthesis*] **is intellect."**

But by "intellect" Aristotle means even more than the apprehension of these beginnings. He asks how the several perfections he's considered become **useful to us**. It is **not** through theoretical wisdom [*sophia*] that they become so. Indeed, truth be told, "Wisdom contemplates **nothing** by which a human being will be happy (b19)." Rather it is this other faculty ***phronêsis*** that "...is concerned with things that are **just** and **beautiful** and **good for a human being** [;] these are the things that it belongs to a good man to **do**, and **we are not more able to perform these actions by [merely] knowing about them...** (b21f)," he says. At this point we may still be having difficulty seeing that practical sense is more than a latent potential (a "capacity"). Rather we have to understand it as **an active condition**, a fullness of thought that seeks to actively integrate circumstance and experience in a complex calculus issuing in an action. And for Aristotle, knowing does **not** get us to such a developed and active readiness of soul. It is rather practical sense, **phronêsis**, that allows us to so engage the world (1139b1-7).

Seeing the soul as an **integrated whole** (and not made up of disparate parts, distinguishable though they may be), Aristotle now returns to his earlier perplexing insight that **the character of our minds is dependent on the character of our characters.** "The **work**

[*ergon*] **of a human being,**" he says, "is accomplished as a result of practical sense and of excellence [virtue] of character (1144a5f)," for "...the starting point [of thoughtful action]...does not show itself **except** to a good person." This is plain from its opposite Aristotle observes: **vice warps** our perspective and makes it difficult for us to see what is good. Thus he concludes it is the "eye sharpened by experience" (1143b9) that sees what is beautiful as an end or highest good of action and gains its active state **only with virtue** (a 31-2; Sachs paraphrase).[50] Good judgment about the right action issues only from a person of like quality. (Good sense herewith reclaims its double meaning.)

To be effective, excellence requires even more than the having of goodness. It requires an **activating** intelligence [*nous*], Aristotle says, the kind of intelligence that "...**carries over into action...,**" or what he calls "virtue in the **governing** sense" (1144b12f),[51] And this is what "practical" sense makes possible[52] (b17: "...**does not come without** practical sense").[53]

Phronêsis is thus not just one among the several human excellences ("...**all** the excellences will be present," he concludes, "[only] when one excellence, practical sense, is present"). Here we see that *phronêsis* is **the enabling excellence.**[54] Moreover at the very beginning of his book, Aristotle emphasized that we must first discover what is the **principal activity or work,** unique to a being, for it is the perfection of this "work" that leads to its fulfillment or happiness. We here learn that it is practical sense that is the prerequisite to that fulfillment, our fulfillment.[55]

This conclusion is striking both for what is said and who says it: Aristotle, the man who for the tradition represents the speculative philosopher *par excellence.* Yet it is Aristotle here who urges us to develop "that **other** intellectual virtue" as the virtue that will enable us to think well as also the one most important for "our own proper good" and for our lives together in the city.

8. The Looking Glass:

"He did not know how to govern free men."
Lysander I 594

"It is a hard thing to give laws to the Cyrenians,
abounding in wealth and plenty."
Lucullus I 661

Such a view of the centrality of ***phronêsis*** is shared by Plutarch. Indeed here we see why the reading of Plutarch is so valuable. Many things in his work are "worthy of memory," but unlike abstract treatments, the ***Lives*** display pre-eminently the interplay and indeed the consequences of character and practical sense in the world of circumstance. We are brought back to our place in the city, re-concretized in our thinking, our thoughts firmly founded on the soil of unmediated experience.[56] This Plutarch understood to be the proper role of "history" and "biography" in liberal education

But not only "in theory." Just as he discovered for himself, it is Plutarch's profound hope that his readers would find in the "looking glass" of his texts experiences wherein their own capacities for "subtle discriminations" might be developed and their practical sense honed. He hoped as well that we would find therein people from whom we might "gain experience," both what to avoid—and there are plenty of lessons there to be found—and those rare individuals whose excellences might inspire us to emulation. For those wondering "Why are we reading Plutarch? It's only history," we would propose this as the beginning of a reply

So we ask you tonight to reopen the book on "that **other** intellectual excellence," *phronesis* or practical sense, and reclaim its priority for our lives. Minimally, by so doing we would become more attentive to the complexity of human things and the richness of the world before us; maximally we would develop our fine judgment and perhaps begin to live up to that with which we choose to associate ourselves [II 445].

So we ask you tonight as well to emulate Plutarch—not just by being "strengthened by the experience" [I 201, 646] of reading him—but also by ourselves taking up the "looking glass" of **writing** as a medium of self-discovery wherein we may shape **ourselves** as we seek to discover the shape of things.

9. Postscript in Seminar: The Faculty of the Faculty:

"Good judgment goes with the way
each one is educated."
Aristotle[57]

Lastly, let us return to where we began: **seminar**. By a somewhat long and oblique route, we have been exploring a faculty of knowledge, distinctive to human beings, that focuses on the confluence of the general and the specific. At the outset we spoke about an ability that good tutors and students possess that enables them to so craft their questions or remarks that they are not only generally apt but are **tailor-made-thoughts** aiding learners in their personal struggles to find their way through the confusions of a developing conversation. That is, our prompting questions or nudging remarks might be "just right" **both** for the larger context—the seminar conversation as a whole—and for you, the learner with your particular degree of readiness and openness to possibilities. Such **just-right-questioning** presupposes a knowledge both of the particular and the general, requires that capacity, I would submit, that Aristotle identifies as "practical sense."

Indeed this is the **distinctive excellence** of a teaching faculty[58] (as opposed to a research faculty): **to hear where a particular learner is "coming from" and design our response "to order"** that **our** question or comment might be helpful to **them** as they seek to find their way to discovery. In the midst of perplexity, what we want and need as learners is **not** a lecture or a theory but helpful, specific, "practical" guidance. ***Phronêsis*** is not unique to the faculty, though perhaps it is more developed there. We thus do our students and one another a disservice when we do not offer **an opening question** but give a **closed** answer, and we fail as a faculty when we fall back into being professors and you fail as students when you fall back into being passive scribes. As we learned from Plato's ***Meno***, answers, abstracted, deracinated, blind thoughts do not help us find our way to Larissa.

Such **tailor made teaching** (X ix 1180b8-9) can only happen in a place small enough for genuine conversation, where faculty are present to their students and not lost in their own thoughts, where we are all attentive to the learning trajectories of one another, and where—and this is equally important—students likewise are insistent that they must find their **own** way to discovery.

So we ask you tonight to make such a place a reality, to seek to question well, to make your efforts of inquiry such that they further both your own learning **and** that of your fellow learners. And may we continue to say: **Good question**!

..Thank you

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1 Given on August 27, 2004 as the annual Friday night "Dean's Lecture" to open the 40th academic year at St. John's College, Santa Fe. All quotations and references are from ***Plutarch's Lives,*** translated by John Dryden (1683) and revised by Arthur Clough (1864), Volumes I and II, New York, 2001 (hereafter ***Lives*** or [I or II page]). All references to Aristotle's ***Nicomachean Ethics*** are from the new translation by Joe Sachs, our colleague in Annapolis, (Newburyport, Massachusetts, 2002) [hereafter *NE*]. My thanks to Jacqueline Levine, Lore Zeller, Krishnan Venkatesh, Bruce Perry, and John Cornell for their thoughtful suggestions and comments.

2 ***Philosophy in Hard Times***, #71.

3 *NE* X ix 1180b8-9.

4 See also *Demosthenes* II 396: They were "...better able to recommend than to imitate virtues of the past."

5 *NE* II iv 1105b11-13, see also 1112a10, VI x 1143a1-20, 1179b5,

6 Jean Jacques Rousseau, ***Emile or On Education***, translated by Allan Bloom, New York, 1979, p. 240.

7 Montesquieu: "What Histories can be found...that please and instruct like the ***Lives*** of Plutarch?...I am of the Opinion with that Author, who said, that if he was constrained to fling all the Books of the Ancients into the Sea, Plutarch should be the last drowned." And Emerson: "A bible for heroes." For an even longer list of those influenced by Plutarch, see Roger Kimball, "***Plutarch and the Issue of Character,***" ***Lives of the Mind***, Chicago, 2002, pp. 18-21.

8 A question we should ask of all the authors on the program.

9 "Re-enter" because we live in more than one world, we moderns, with our abstract thoughts overriding and prisming our experience.

10 Compare Plato, ***Republic*** II [ ] where we are asked to see the city as the magnified image of the soul.

11 "...Beware of **ambition**, as of all the higher powers, **the most destructive and pernicious...**" [I 609]. "For men whose ambition neither seas, nor mountains, nor unpeopled deserts can limit, nor the bounds dividing Europe and Asia confine their vast desires, it would be hard to expect to forbear from injuring another ...when they close together. They are ever **naturally at war**, envying and seeking advantages of one another, and merely make use of those two words, peace and war, like current coin, to serve their occasions, not as justice, but as expediency suggests..." [*Pyrrhus* I 527]. And I 523: "...the innate disease of princes....."

12 *NE* I iii 1095a1-10: "Therefore good judgment goes along with the way each one is educated.... For this reason, it is not appropriate for young people to be a student of politics, since the young are **inexperienced in the actions of life**.... And since the young are apt to follow their impulses, **they would hear such discourses without purpose or benefit**.... And it makes no difference whether one is **young in age or immature in character,** for the deficiency doesn't come from the time, but the living in accord with feeling and following every impulse;" also VI viii 1142a12-20: "A sign of what is being said is why young people become skilled geometricians and mathematicians, and wise in respect to such things, but they do not seem to become possessed of practical judgment, and the reason is that practical judgment has to do with particulars, which become known by experience, but the young are not experienced, since it is length of **time** that produces experiences;" see also VI ix 1143b 10-15. And *Lucullus* I 661.

13 Plato, ***Republic***, II-III.

14 As we recognize in proposing a "great books program" for one another's "improvement."

15 "...For the **mere sight itself of a shining and conspicuous example** of virtue in the life of their prince will bring them spontaneously to virtue, and to a conformity with that blameless and blessed life of good-will and mutual concord, supported by temperance and justice, which is the highest benefit that human means can confer; and he is the truest ruler who can best introduce it into the hearts and practice of his subjects" [*Numa Pompilius* I 99]. In this respect, there is little one can say that can approximate the radiance of the *paradeignma* or example: "Now there's a man!"

Indeed it may not be something that lends itself to *logos*, "to argument and proof" [cp. I 420]. Plutarch thereby helps us to restore our attention to what is imposingly present even in our small worlds.

Martin Heidegger, ***Plato's Sophist***, Indianapolis, 1997, renders *paradeigma* as "striking example:" "they show the universal through the obviousness of some particular case, through a definite example. This is the way to produce conviction in others. This is the way of *epagoge* (***Posterior Analytics***, 71a8)." "To elucidate what is familiar already at the outset is rather a matter of *epagoge*, the mode of clarification proper to **straightforward perception**. *Epagoge* is clearly the beginning, i.e. that which discloses the *arche* [the source]; it is **the more original**, not *episteme*" (p. 25). How to articulate what is revealed thereby remains a question for us: do "striking examples" show the universal through the particular or the fullness of the particular? (See Emmanuel Levinas, *Without Identity*, ***Humanism of the Other***, Urbana, 2003, p. 61)

16 Aristotle too urged us to take our bearings by those who are serious (*spoudaios*, *paradeigma*). They provide a **standard**, a reference, by which to act (and not just an illustration or instance) from our direct experience and from our reading experience thereof.

17 *To kalon*: the beautiful; see NE III vi 1115b12-13: "...for the sake of the beautiful, since this is **the end that belongs to virtue.**" Also Sachs, ***NE***, p. 49, n. 61. "Measure, proportion and harmony are in the nature of things and we have a direct responsiveness to them that orients us in the world" (*Measure, Moderation and the Mean*, ***The St. John's Review***, xlvi, 2003, p. 9).

18 "...The supreme arts of temperance, of justice and wisdom, as they are **acts of judgment and selection**, exercised not on good and just and expedient only, but also on wicked, unjust, and inexpedient objects, do not give their commendations to the mere innocence whose boast is its inexperience of evil, and whose truer name is... simpleness and ignorance of what all men who live aright should know.... The ancient Spartans, at their festivals, used to force their Helots to swallow large quantities of raw wine, and then expose them at the public tables, to let the young men see what it is to be drunk. And though I do not think it consistent with humanity or with civil justice to correct one man...by corrupting another, yet we may, I think, avail ourselves of the cases of those who have fallen into indiscretions, and have, in high stations, made themselves conspicuous for misconduct.... In the same manner, it seems to me likely enough that we shall be all the **more zealous and more emulous** to read, observe and imitate the better lives, if we are not left in ignorance of the blameworthy and the bad" [*Demetrius* II 445]. As we become what we do, so we live out what we have become ("...their fortunes carried out the resemblance of their characters" [II 446]).

19 Levine, "*'I Hate Books,' or Making Room for Learning*," p. 3.

20 Cp. the pimple on the nose of the Miller (Chaucer, *Prologue or Miller's Tale [?]*, ***Canterbury Tales***).

21 Medicine is frequently the metaphor of the diagnostic political art (knowledge of "the causes of disorders in the body politic" [I 609]) in Plutarch: see I 215, II 125, 286, 336, 560, 565, 699.

22 "Marks and indications of the soul," see I 337, 469, 479, II 61, 285, 294, 324, 374, 596. Also see Xenophon, ***Memorabilia***, III x 1-8 (cited in....)

23 **Nor** is he thus a "biographer." Though he uses both terms, biography and history, Plutarch is at pains to show that his is of a very specific sort, unlike what we have become accustomed to expect. The history of these terms would be interesting to explore.

24 Here we see the origin of Montaigne's and Rousseau's admiration for Plutarch. "'Those who write lives," says Montaigne, "are more suited to me to the extent that they are interested in intentions more than in results, in what takes place within than in what happens without. That is **why Plutarch is my man**....' Plutarch excels in these very details into which we no longer dare to enter. He has an inimitable **grace** at depicting great men in small things: and he is so felicitous in the choice of his stories that often a word, a smile, a gesture is enough for him to **characterize** his hero. With a joking phrase Hannibal reassures his terrified army and makes it march laughing to the battle which won Italy for him. Agesilaus astride a stick makes me love the Great King's conqueror. Caesar passing through a poor village and chatting with his friends betrays, unthinkingly, the deceiver who said he wanted only to be Pompey's equal. Alexander swallows medicine and does not say a single word; it is the most beautiful moment of his life. Aristides writes his own name on a shell and thus justifies his surname. Philopoemen, with his cloak off, cuts wood in his host's kitchen. **This is the true art of painting.** Physiognomy does not reveal itself in large features, nor character in great

actions. It is in bagatelles [trifles] that nature comes to light. The public things are either too uniform or too artificial; and it is almost solely on these [public things] that modern dignity permits our authors to dwell" (Rousseau, ***Emile***, pp. 240-1).

[25] From a Cartesian perspective, this may be taken as an expression of regret; though in this context it is intended as a conundrum of our one-sidedly abstract orientation. (Related to me by Roger Kimball).

[26] The obliqueness of prince-like discretion.

[27] See Plato, ***Apology of Socrates***.

[28] In this respect, Plutarch is seeking to reinitiate the Socratic turn back to the city, though with a specifically ethical intent (see Plato, ***Phaedo***). It is thus not only modern thought that tends to the excessively theoretical or abstract. In line with this, he does not read Plato as an "idealist" [see *Dion* II 543-550], but reads the dialogues as embedded in the world (a cave though it might be) leading thereby to action. As we see as well, he is not unaware of the precariousness of such an undertaking by philosophy even here.

[29] Consider the problem of equity at ***NE*** V x 1137b11-32.

[30] Just as the modern novel complements the abstractness of modern philosophy.

[31] "*Phronesis* is not a speculation about *arche* and the *telos* of action as such; it is not a [theoretical] ethics, not a science, not *a hexis meta logou monon* [an active condition according to reason alone] [VI v 1140b28] (***Plato's Sophist***, pp. 40-2).

[32] ***Hexis***: variously translated as habit, disposition, active condition. We miss what is essential therein if we fail to see it as a developed, if invisible, mode of **activity**, an "active having" (Sachs). It is not just a propensity, predisposition, orientation, or even mere capacity, or potential, but an active state of readiness that manifests itself when circumstances require, an immanent responsiveness, if you will. "Intelligence carries over into action," Aristotle will say later. Consider the sense of fullness and vitality that comes with growth and discovery, an inner resourcefulness ready to bloom.

[33] What is notable about Aristotle's classification of the faculties of the soul is his singling out of a capacity that we nowadays don't admit as a human capacity. It is here claimed to be **different in kind** from our general intelligence. Indeed the largest part of Book VI is dedicated to the introduction and disclosure of *phronesis*. See note 54.

[34] Aristotle presents a different view of the development of character ("ethics"). His is not a backward looking ethic, a genetic psychology where one is defined by one's first beginnings. Human motivation is not limited to hidden or subconscious sources. Rather his is forward looking, a growth psychology, end directed and open to new possibilities. The future, and not just the past, is defining. Character formation thus supercedes developmental histories, maturity "copping mechanisms."

[35] Cp. ***NE*** I iii 1094b22-24: "...it belongs to an educated person to look for just so much precision in each kind of discourse as the nature of the thing one is concerned with admits; for to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician seems about like accepting probable conclusions from a mathematician."

[36] "*Phronesis* is a *hexis* of *aletheuein* [truth disclosing active condition], a disposition of human *Dasein* such that in it I have at my disposal my own transparency. For its themes are the *anthopina agatha* [human goods]. And it is a *hexis* of *aletheuein* which is *praktike*, which **lives in action**" (Heidegger, ***Plato's Sophist***, p. 37). Also "*Phronesis* dwells in *praxis* still more than in *logos*" (p. 96) and "*Phronesis* is nothing if it is not carried out in *praxis*" (p.115).

[37] Who do we think of as having such a "truth disclosing condition"? The examples Aristotle entertains range from those overseeing a household to political figures, and in this context he gives the wonderfully ambiguous example of Pericles, the ruler of Athens at the outset of the Peloponnesian war (and whose full ambiguity is seen in Plutarch's account).

[38] It is at this point that Heidegger makes his famous observation: "...Aristotle has here come across the phenomenon of **conscience.** ***Phronesis*** is nothing other than conscience set in motion, making an action transparent.

Conscience cannot be forgotten" (***Plato's Sophist***, p. 39). That ***phronesis*** is not an inferential, reasoning faculty does not mean that it is a "intuitive" faculty. It is "the other intellectual virtue." Moreover ***phronesis*** for Aristotle is not given in its perfection but can and indeed needs to be developed. (See Hans-Georg Gadamer, ***Truth and Method***, New York, 1982, pp. 278-289 and Ronald Beiner, ***Political Judgment***, Chicago, 1983, pp. 72-82).

Earlier Heidegger writes: "For one who has learned to understand an author it is perhaps not possible to take as a foundation for the interpretation what the author designates as the most important. It is precisely where an author is **silent** that one has to begin in order to understand what the author himself designates as the most proper" (p. 32; also 43). Here we see the origin of deconstruction: the premises of our thoughts are often inexplicit, hidden even from the thinker himself. This would seem to be an over-reaction to the problem of embedded presuppositions. For it would make all science, all knowledge, mysterious, if not meaningless, where it might only be unreflective (not necessarily wrong). Moreover it would seem to mean that 'truth' ultimately resides in one's premises. While our conclusions are only as good as our premises, truth resides in the author's developed view as well. A house stands even if we can't see its foundations; its strength is evident in the sturdiness of the whole.

39 Gadamer puts this into relief thus: its antithesis is blindness not error (***Truth and Method***, p. 287).

40 Aristotle notes that while it is true, in a certain sense, that "...it is absurd for anyone to believe that...practical sense is **the most serious kind of knowledge**, if a human being is not the highest thing in the cosmos (1141a21; also b1)"—and for Aristotle we may not be the most important beings in the cosmos (And if there is no such cosmos?)—still, without forgetting the bigger picture, this faculty remains **the most important for human life** lest we not live life well as a whole.

41 "*Phronesis* makes the situation accessible; and the circumstances are always different in every action" (Heidegger, ***Plato's Sophist***, p. 20); "This circumspection [mode of circumspective disclosure] isolates that with which the action, the bringing into being, begins" (p. 32); '*Phronesis* is the inspection of the this-here-now, the inspection of the concrete momentoriness of the transient situation" (p. 112).

42 It is thus a mistake to think of practical insight as the subsumption of the particular to the universal. For example, Thomas Aquinas: "...we must say that the practical intellect has a beginning in a universal consideration, and, according to this, is the same in subject with the speculative, but its consideration terminates in an individual operative thing" (***Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics***, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1964/1993, p. 361 [#1132]—hereafter ***Commentary***). Or again: "...to frame a decree that is simply the application of universal reason to a particular practicable..." (p. 381 [#1199]). For Thomas practical intellect is thus a species of theoretical intellect, the act of practical judgment the application of a universal rule to a specific situation.

Aristotle however says *phronesis'* uniqueness lies in its apprehension of ultimate particulars; Thomas sees it in the subordination of specific wisdom to theoretical wisdom. Herein we see the beginning of the loss of ***phronesis*** as a separate faculty with a unique purview and, with the loss of continuity with the things of our world, the increasing estrangement and subjectivity of thought (the skeptical spectator), with the end result that this faculty, *phronesis*, is largely eclipsed or lost sight of in modern thought. All thinking becomes abstract thinking. See notes 31 and 54 above. The alienation of the Cartesian ego is not far behind. This is the beginning of a much larger study for us.

See Burt Hopkins, "*Jacob Klein and the Phenomenological Project of Desedimenting the Formalization of Meaning*, ***St. John's Review***, xlvii, 2003, p. 65.

43 For Heidegger (***Plato's Sophist***, p. 97) the benefit of experience is the amount of time to accumulate enough experiences to "dominate the manifold"—not the time necessary to refine and mature one's judgment to the range of possibilities, to weigh their respective worth, to asses the manifold factors as each adding a vector to the complex calculus of *phronesis*.

44 Sachs directs us to ***De Anima*** 431a14-18 and b3-10 as well as to ***NE*** 1109b23 and 1126b4. Attention to the fundamental role of intellect was highlighted for me in freshman seminar two years ago by the perspicuous questioning of Jackson Carpenter, for which I am grateful.

45 Cp. Thomas, ***Commentary***: "However it is not apprehended by that sense which perceives the species of proper sensibles...but by the **inner sense** which perceives things sensibly conceivable. Similarly in mathematics we know the exterior triangle, or the triangle conceived as singular, because there we also conform to a sensible

conceivable singular, as in the natural sciences..." (p. 384-5 [#1214]); "Prudence, which perfects particular reason, rightly to judge singular practicable relations, pertains rather to this, i.e. **inner sense**" [#1215].

"Aristotle says that we know these things by **perception**, not the perception of the five senses, but the sort by which we perceive that a triangle is the last kind of figure into which a polygon can be divided. This sort of perceiving contains thinking and imagining, but what it judges, it judges by perceiving it to be so....Such things are among particulars, and judgment is in the act of sense-perception (1109b23-4)." "But this is the calmly energetic thought-laden perception." (Sachs, *Three Little Words*, ***St. John's Review***, xliv, pp. 12, 15).

[46] ***Emile***, p. 203.

[47] Aristotle's formulation of **the utter specificity of action**: *NE* II iii 1104b23: "...the ones one ought not, or when one ought not, or in a way one ought not, **or in as many other ways such distinctions are articulated**," and II iv 1105a3-35: "...with the things that come about as a result of the virtues, just because they are a certain way, it is not the case that one does them justly...but only if the one doing them does them in a certain way, if one does them first of all knowingly, and next, having chosen them and chosen them for their own sake, and third, being in a stable condition and not able to be moved out of it."

[48] Thomas says this beautifully: "...the man who considers the common features alone will not know how to proceed to action by reason of this generality" (***Commentary***, p. 354 [#1111]).

[49] "...At 1142a23-27, [it is said] that intellect and practical judgment stand at opposite extremes, directed at the unarticulated and individual terms of thought and the ultimate particulars of perception. The two extremes are now said to be united in the one faculty of intellect, that contemplates the universals contained in the ultimate particulars, which can be the only terms for a knowledge of truth. The same activity that holds a particular thing together is at work on the soul even in perception. Thus the claim that a single power stands at the root of theoretical and practical knowing rests on the ultimate conclusions of the highest kind of philosophy, which are arrived at in Bk. III of ***On the Soul*** and Bk. XII of the ***Metaphysics***. Here that claim asserts the unity of the human being" (Sachs, ***NE***, p. 114, n.168). See 1141b15.

[50] *NE* 1113a29-b1, 1139b4-5, 1143b13-14, 1144b30-32; and Sachs, ***NE***, p. 117, n. 173.

[51] By governing sense, Thomas reminds us, we mean thereby that which will allow us to "govern ourselves" above all (***Commentary***, p. 377 [#1185]).

[52] Thus it is the case, Aristotle says, that human excellence cannot be "...just an active condition in **accord** with right reason," as Socrates seems to say at times, for example in the ***Meno*** (though see ***Gorgias***), "but one that [must actively] **involve**[] right reason" (1144b25).

[53] This is puzzling. Since choice is rational desire for Aristotle, it is inseparable from action. Yet here it is intellect that is the motive agency underlying action. Our new question: what is the relationship of reason and desire in Aristotle? (Cp. Kant).

[54] "The **two highest modes** of *aletheuein* [truth disclosure] [in Aristotle] are *phronesis* and *sophia*" (Heidegger, Plato's ***Sophist***, p. 39).

[55] Lest we still think that he is speaking of some merely practical ability like "cleverness" [*deinos*], Aristotle once more helps us by making a distinction. We're not just speaking about some natural craftiness or shrewdness. "...Cleverness enables one to do the things that are conducive to the object one sets down and to achieve it... [However] if [one's] object is base, [then this ability] is shameless..." (1144a22-29). Practical sense is **not** cleverness, though it too presupposes an ability to achieve ends.

[56] See Gadamer, ***Truth and Method***, p. 288; Heidegger, ***Plato's Sophist***, p. 25.

[57] *NE* I iii 1095a1-2.

[58] Indeed the virtue of good conversation (KV).