The Puzzle of Nous in the Nicomachean Ethics

Abstract (Word Count: 150)

Aristotle’s scattered references to nous in the Nicomachean Ethics are difficult to interpret and to reconcile both with each other and with accounts of nous offered elsewhere in the corpus. There are two prominent interpretations of these puzzling passages: (1) the view that there is just one kind of nous and its role in practical activity is parallel to the role described for it in Posterior Analytics, and (2) the view that the disparate passages refer to fundamentally different kinds of nous that are related only analogically. Against both interpretations, I argue that theoretical and practical nous are distinct but tightly connected. My central claim is that nous in both forms is a capacity to relate concrete particulars with universals. The relevant passages appear incongruent because while we engage in this kind of thinking in both the practical and theoretical realms, the way in which we do so differs substantially.

The Puzzle of Nous in the Nicomachean Ethics
(Word Count: 2,941)

Aristotle talks about understanding or intellect, nous, in confusing and even apparently contradictory ways in the Nicomachean Ethics. His scattered references to nous are difficult to interpret and to reconcile with each other and with accounts of nous offered in other works. There are two prominent interpretations of these puzzlingly disparate passages. On the first interpretation, the role of nous in ethics is an application of the account of nous described in Posterior Analytics II.19; accordingly, I call this the univocal conception of nous. According to the second interpretation, the seemingly disparate passages in the Ethics refer to fundamentally different kinds of nous, practical and theoretical, and the relationship between the two is largely analogical. The similarity between theoretical and practical nous is that they occupy a similar position in their respective realms: both capacities grasp basic elements which must be accepted for the successful practice of their respective disciplines. The nous of theoretical science and the nous of ethics, however, are unlike one another in their nature and operation.
Against both interpretations, I argue that theoretical and practical noûs are distinct but tightly connected, neither the same as one another nor merely analogous to one another. Noûs in all its forms, I contend, is a capacity to relate particulars with universals. We engage in this kind of thinking in both the practical and the theoretical realm, connecting the concrete particular instances we observe with universal truths. The way in which we do so differs substantially, however, and the difficult, apparently disparate, passages in the Ethics are a reflection of this.

According to the univocal reading, advocated by Reeve, Cooper, and others at least as early as Burnet, noûs operates in ethics just as it does in science – in both contexts, noûs enables us to grasp undemonstrated universal first principles. In A.Po. II.19, Aristotle argues that we require an intuitive capacity for coming to know the first principles of any science, because without such a capacity we would face a regress of demonstrations or would be forced to accept that we are born already knowing many things that we do not, in fact, seem to know until we have made an effort to discover them. We perceive many particular situations, and over time this gives rise to induction (epagôgê) – generalization of relevant aspects of these particular situations. Induction in turn gives rise to noûs – intuition of the necessary, universal first principles that form the basis of reasoning within the relevant science. Cooper says that because both practical and theoretical inquiry must begin from undemonstrated assumptions, “exactly the same argument applies” in the practical and theoretical contexts. So, there are ‘ethical first principles’ and practical knowledge can be derived from them. We grasp ethical first principles

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4 i.e. demonstration. See Posterior Analytics 100a3-100a9.
5 Cooper, p. 65.
6 Reeve further claims that formal demonstrations yielding scientific knowledge (episteme) are possible in the practical context.
through *noûs* and then cultivate a practical outlook that lends itself to realizing them to the

But if the univocal reading is correct, passages in Book VI of the *Ethics* patently

contradict each other, since some explicitly connect *noûs* to theoretical reason and contrast it

with practical reason, while others say that *noûs* is necessary for practical decision-making. *EN*

VI.6 offers an account of *noûs* that echoes that of *A.Po.*, ruling out all intellectual virtues but

*noûs* as possible sources of the first principles in scientific inquiry, and concluding by a process

of elimination that such principles must come from *noûs*. This account is followed in VI.7 by the

claim that “*sophia* will be a combination of *noûs* and *epistêmê* – *episteme*…of the highest

objects”, which seems to rule out *noûs* being involved in practical reasoning, because it is in turn

immediately followed by the following explanation: “for it is strange to think – if anyone does –

that political expertise, or practical reason, is what is to be taken most seriously; unless, that is,

man is the best thing there is in the universe” (1141a20). In VI 8, too, Aristotle distances

*phronêsis* from *noûs* and from scientific reason. He has already said that the *phronîmos* is

primarily a good deliberator (1140a33), and he states in a number of places that *phronêsis* is the

virtue of good deliberation. Here (1142a21-27), he distances this kind of reasoning, reasoning in

the practical context, from virtues involved with theoretical inquiry – *noûs* and *epistêmê*, even

claiming that “*phronesis* is antithetical to *noûs*” (1142a25).

On the other hand, Aristotle also states that decision (*prohairesis*) either involves *noûs* or

is itself *noûs* qualified by desire (1139b4), that *prohairesis* issues in action and requires both

*noûs* and an appropriate character-disposition (1139a33), that *noûs* has particulars as its objects

(1143a25), and that “the object of the sort [of *noûs*] that operates with practical dispositions is

what is last and contingent, and belongs to the second premise” (1143b2-3). At 1144b9, *noûs* is
said to distinguish those with natural virtue from those who are truly virtuous – “natural dispositions belong to children and animals as well; but without noûs to accompany them they are evidently harmful”.

We can make sense of both sorts of passage only if we reject the univocal view and instead hold that there is one sort of noûs at work in the theoretical realm, and another sort at work in the practical realm. This multivocal reading can make sense of seemingly conflicting references to noûs because it holds that passages contrasting practical reasoning with noûs refer to a capacity that is specific to the theoretical context, while passages connecting practical reasoning with noûs refer to a capacity that is specific to the practical context. Understanding the role of noûs in practical thinking, then, requires setting aside passages which make reference to theoretical noûs exclusively and examining remaining passages to see what sort of account they yield. These passages suggest that noûs is connected to capacities that are fundamental to practical activity, and that it is connected to particulars.

Sarah Broadie, who offers the most comprehensive of recent multivocal accounts, is thus right to say that “[p]ractical noûs is above all an ability to grasp particular situations”\(^7\). Broadie contends that practical noûs must be fundamentally different from noûs in the theoretical context. The reason that the theoretical and the practical capacity are both called noûs, despite their deep dissimilarities, is that they are different capacities with parallel roles in their respective fields\(^8\). Each grasps an answer to the most fundamental question of the discipline, and in both cases this answer can only be grasped once we have examined the more readily apparent subject matter of the discipline, so that noûs provides us with what is “last in the order of inquiry”, even though it


\(^{8}\) Ibid., 244
is “first in the order of explanation”⁹. What Broadie seems to have in mind here is the following: in science, first principles only become evident to us once we have engaged in dialectic – that is, once we have considered plausible or prominent beliefs about the subject matter at hand and clarified our beliefs about what is subject to further inquiry and what must be taken as a bedrock assumption in order for pursuit of the discipline to be possible at all; in ethics, right actions only become evident to us once we have worked to observe and emulate wise individuals and have endeavored to form good habits. So, first principles in science and prescriptions for action in ethics, respectively, come to us only after we have familiarized ourselves with the subject matter of the field.

In the case of science, Broadie says, noûs gives us a fundamental fact in answer to a “why” question. A question such as ‘why does a geometrical formula work?’ can be answered by first principles of geometry that are grasped by noûs only after a certain level of familiarity with the subject matter of geometry is achieved. In the case of ethics, by contrast, noûs gives us a practical choice in response to a “how” question. A question such as ‘how can I achieve temperance?’ can be answered by an understanding of particular situations that is grasped by noûs only after a certain level of familiarity with the subject matter of ethics is achieved. The similarity between theoretical and practical noûs, then, is that both grasp basic elements which must be perceived and accepted for the successful practice of their respective disciplines, but which only become clear to us once we have already inquired thoughtfully into the subject matter of those disciplines.

For Broadie, noûs as involved in scientific reasoning and noûs as involved in ethical deliberation are very different from one another. Whereas theoretical noûs involves the grasp of

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⁹ Ibid., pp. 245, 255
archai, first principles or starting points for the activity of the discipline, practical noûs involves
the grasp of particulars that are not classified as belonging to types; they are “theoretically raw”
not only because they are not classified in theoretical terms, but because they cannot be grasped
from an abstract theoretical standpoint. Practical noûs grasps “phenomena given in advance of
scientific reflection, hence not seen as informed by their causes nor as instancing universal types
whose regular conjunctions betoken some principle present though not yet identified.” In other
words, it grasps phenomena which simply could not be seen as instances of fundamental
principles or of universals. Through noetic intuition, “the agent loaded with his various interests
simply responds to his view of the particulars by selecting one or another means,” without
recognizing those particulars as specific instances of universals. Theoretical noûs, on the other
hand, grasps fundamental ontological entities, universals, or necessary truths.

A central problem for Broadie’s view is that it does not give practical noûs an intellectual
canonical character. Any capacity called noûs, practical or theoretical, must be a capacity for grasping
something intellectually or with understanding. It is difficult to see how, on her account,
practical noûs’s ability to perceive what is appropriate in a given situation is different from an
animal’s (non-noetic) ability to sense the particulars of a given situation, such as smells, sounds,
and visual cues. For on its face, her view seems, like animals’ perception, to involve reading
situational particulars in light of general, fairly indeterminate desires and interests. Recognizing
this, Broadie defends her view by arguing that unlike animal perception, the perception of noûs
involves a “general cognitive alertness”, a “readiness to read situations in ways that present them

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 244
12 Ibid., 248
as containing or not containing a certain kind of object or possibility.”

Her attempt to make this subtle distinction between the cognitive alertness of human beings and the non-cognitive alertness of animals, I believe, is not convincing.

It is more plausible to view ethical and theoretical noûs as connected yet distinct capacities, rather than analogous ones. I contend that in both the practical and the theoretical context, noûs connects universals with particulars. In the theoretical domain, noûs is an intellectual capacity to grasp, on the basis of encounters with a range of particular instances, that some universal or underlying principle is common to all. In the practical domain, noûs involves intellectual recognition that an aspect of a given circumstance, a circumstance with a unique combination of particular features, demands a response in accordance with a universal practical moral or ethical principle.

This interpretation resolves the problem of clearly distinguishing a sophisticated animal’s capacity to respond to salient features of situations from a human being’s noetic capacity to do so, faced by Broadie’s multivocal account. Since animals cannot grasp universals, the idea that noûs in all its forms connects universals with particulars makes it a capacity that is obviously uniquely human.

My view also accords better with the range of passages in the Ethics. Consider the 1143b2-3 passage already mentioned: when considered in its broader context, the passage seems to compare theoretical and practical noûs.

noûs has as its objects what is last in both directions, for both the primary definitions and what is last in practical reasoning are to be grasped by noûs, not with an account, the objects of the sort of noûs that operates in demonstrations being definitions that are unchanging and first, while the object of the sort that operates with practical dispositions is what is last and contingent and belongs to

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13 Ibid., 251
In one direction, *noûs* has first principles as its objects, which are grasped intuitively and lack an account or demonstration to prove them true. They are the ‘last thing’ in a line of theoretical explanation or argument because no further argument can be offered in favor of accepting them. First principles are the starting point for demonstrative reasoning; we accept them as self-evident and can offer no further proof of their truth. In the other direction, in the practical realm, *noûs* has particulars as its objects. *Noûs* grasps the features of particular situations that are ‘last’ in the sense that they are not deliberated over and are not the product of reasoning, but are specific to a unique set of circumstances; the noetic grasping of a particular a situation is, when seen through the lens of the universal values that matter to an agent, what gives rise to a determination about how to act. This is why this kind of object of *noûs* ‘belongs to the second premise’ – it serves as the minor premise in an argument for action that is analogous to a syllogism.

Theoretical and practical *noûs* share not only ‘lastness’, but also recognition of something universal that arises from particulars. The *A.Po.* II.19 account of *noûs* tells us that human beings perceive particulars, then remember what they perceive and turn related memories “in connection with the same thing” into experience (*empeiria*) (100a5), and the capacity of *noûs* enables experience to give rise to the recognition of a universal first principle. In ethics, *noûs* plays a role in determining that a specific situation is one in which a given ethical principle or value, accepted as universal – i.e. as being of value for a worthwhile life generally, no matter our other interests and commitments – is applicable, or requires action, in this very particular time and place. We can see this use of ‘universal’ in the III.1 account of voluntary action, where Aristotle states that ignorance of a universal (a principle or value) is cause for blame while
ignorance of a particular is not (1111a1), and in references to the practical syllogism, in which a universal principle or value constitutes the major premise (e.g. 1142a20-23, 1147a2).

Contra Broadie, practical noûs is intellectual because it involves not only the recognition of particular features of a situation, but also the recognition that those particular features are features of a certain type, a type which demands a particular sort of practical response. In both the practical and the theoretical realm, then, the activity of noûs is a capacity that recognizes particulars as instances of universal principles or categories. In the case of ethics, noûs is an intellectual capacity to grasp, on the basis of a range of particular, even unique, circumstances, that a value or goal which we hold under all circumstances is applicable. In the case of science, noûs is an intellectual capacity to grasp, on the basis of a range of particular instances or circumstances, a universal underlying entity or principle. So in each domain, noûs recognizes the applicability of a universal principle to a given set of particulars.

This is why Aristotle says that practical noûs and virtue of character are both required for prohairesis (1139a33, 1139b4). Prohairesis is the firm decision or choice to act in a certain way. In order to reach such a decision, we must know what kinds of actions are good, and we must be able to recognize that although a broad range of good actions could conceivably be performed in any given circumstance, the situation in which we find ourselves now requires a specific kind of good action (say, a courageous one rather than a magnanimous one). Possessing virtue of character means having an understanding of the various sorts of good action, because in involves the acceptance of a range of values and aims deemed important or worthy of pursuit (1151a15). So, a grasp of virtue of character means understanding that forgiveness is magnanimous and that standing one’s ground is courageous. It does not by itself, however, allow us to grasp which situations require magnanimity or courageousness, standing firm or extending an olive branch.
The exercise of practical noûs recognizes how a unique situation, combining a range of very particular features, is one which demands the instantiation of one of the universally held values instilled by virtue of character.

A.W. Price has recently characterized practical noûs in somewhat similar terms. Although his account is brief, he suggests that practical noûs yields “intuitions about a situation that are fueled by the agent’s perceptions, and infused by his standing concerns”\(^{14}\). Noûs, he suggests, selects a ‘provisional goal’, informed by virtue of character and prompted by a particular situation\(^{15}\). Noûs identifies which of a broad range of goals is relevant, goals that we recognize as valuable under all circumstances because we have made an effort to develop the virtues of character.

This practical noetic recognition of a universal principle or goal within a circumstance laden with unique particulars is distinctively practical. Yet it is clearly related to the theoretical noetic recognition of a universal principle or category as instantiated by a range of particular instances. Aristotle’s uses of the term ‘noûs’ are thus multivocal, but not fragmentary or straightforwardly homonymous. In the theoretical and in the practical context, noûs is a capacity for locating a universal within a particular.


\(^{15}\) Ibid., pp. 229-230.