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Aristotle 2

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Techne and Phronesis: Compared, Contrasted, and Evaluated

Techne and Phronesis, are two virtues laid out by Aristotle whose meanings are rather hidden amongst sprawling paragraphs of ancient text. This essay however will not only decode the exact meaning of the two virtues, but will also demystify the concepts, and lay out their rules in simple language. It will also be shown that despite an initial similarity the two virtues share, these two virtues are completely different from one and other, as told to us by Aristotle through the exercising of these virtues. Lastly, a comparison between Techne, Phronesis, and Episteme is made to show a final complete distinction between the three, proving their individuality as virtues.

Beginning with the definition of Techne, in its fullest and true form, we shall see that in his works Aristotle defined it as the inquiry into skills that require technical knowledge. An introduction is made within the sixth book of Aristotle's Ethics, where Techne is described as anything that deals with what comes into being by the acts of man:

All art is concerned with coming into being, i.e. with contriving and considering how something may come into being which is capable of either being or not being, and whose origin is in the maker and not in the thing made; for art is concerned neither with things that are, or come into being, by necessity nor with

things that do so in accordance with nature (since these have their origin in themselves).¹

Art is of course one of the many modern translations of *Techne*. Armed with this definition alone, clear outlines can begin to form over activities consider to be under *Techne*. Carpentry, masonry, and sewing all deal with what comes into being not from nature nor necessity, but from man, or in other words, these three crafts have man-made by-products. Yet, *Techne* in its true form must abide by some form of logic or rule system. Two children playing in the park, throwing handfuls of mud and sticks together into incomprehensible sculptures without any thought behind it can not be considered under *Techne*. Because, these childish actions do not hold reason, another qualifier of *Techne* laid out by Aristotle is that *Techne* has, “a true course of reasoning”². Unlike a child playing in the park, a carpenter must abide by rules and logic in order to make coherent structures like tables and chairs. A carpenter can not go into his workshop and begin hammering nails randomly into boards of wood, though the carpenter would make a man-made structure (a board with nails in it), it would not have any form of logical action, therefore not falling under *Techne*.

Carpentry, stone masonry, sewing are all things that can be easily categorized under *Techne* once the two above-mentioned ideas are met. These subjects, all deal with the creations of men, and all follow logical rules. Yet there are other disciplines that although may not be immediately identified as being a technical skill, still follow the two rules and thus very much fall under *Techne*. Let us examine the art of painting: the result of this art form, a painting is something that does not appear in the natural world

¹ Aristotle *Ethics* 6-4

² Aristotle *Ethics* 6-4

and is instead an entire man-made creation, and it simultaneously follows a hard-pressed logical system to make sure it is coherent. Therefore, we can consider subjects that make up the concept of the fine arts, painting, the writing of stories, and photography, to also be a part of Techne. Here we can see why art is used as a modern translation because of how Techne's definition is very congruent to that of the artistic pursuit. Still, however, we can continue the application of Techne's definition to include things in which there is no physical byproduct, but one of man's creation nonetheless. A surgeon for instance must use technical logic in order to perform open-heart surgery on an individual so that this individual may be healed. The healing that comes from a successful open-heart surgery is nowhere to be found in nature, and along with the required logical skill that comes with being a surgeon, thus the profession of being a surgeon also falls under Techne despite the lack of a true physical byproduct. Similarly, wrestling and the production of music are also under Techne due to their byproducts lack of appearance in nature, and the technical ability these two disciplines require. Moving on to a much more controversial topic within Greek philosophy, rhetoric is also a technical skill as told to us by Aristotle. Although very much despised by his mentor Plato, who even denounces any possibility for rhetoric to relate to technical skill in the *Georgias*, Aristotle in his book of *Rhetoric* labels it as an art form, "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art."³ The byproduct of Rhetoric is the persuasion of an audience into the favor of the rhetorician, and the logical skill is found within speaking in a way that would result in this persuasion. Rhetoric itself is identified as its own technical art form that is unique on the basis that it involves only persuasion.

³ Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1-2

Although other art forms can be used to persuade themselves, rhetoric stands alone as the only art that deals in persuasion alone:

Every other art can instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter; for instance, medicine about what is healthy and unhealthy, geometry about the properties of magnitudes, arithmetic about numbers, and the same is true of the other arts and sciences. But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects. ⁴

Showing that to Aristotle, rhetoric is in fact an art form that is classified under *Techne*, given its uniqueness, the logical nature of it, and its byproduct lacking any natural resemblance.

Moving onto *Phronesis*, this virtue deals with wisdom, specifically with moral wisdom or wisdom of a practical nature. Returning again to the *Ethics* of Aristotle, he shall lay down the basic definition of this virtue. This includes the knowledge to determine what actions shall result in a good outcome, “Now it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself”⁵. According to Aristotle, a man who embodies *Phronesis* is able to judge and foresee actions that shall lead him to outcomes that are good and benefit himself. Outside of the *Ethics* Aristotle will define what good is “Now we are applying the term 'good' to what is desirable for its own sake and not for the sake of something else,”⁶. Goodness is things, like happiness and prosperity, whose mere concept brings

⁴ Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1-2

⁵ Aristotle *Ethics* 6-5

⁶ Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1-2

forth reason to achieve them, not requiring anything outside for validation. For instance, the concept of money would not be considered good under Aristotle's definition, given the fact that money is not desired for its own sake. Instead, rather, money is desired for the sake of the things it can buy, and even then, whatever those items may be, they are still not desired for their own sake but rather the status, protection, or glory they bring. Therefore, a man well versed with the virtue of Phronesis is a man who knows the correct way to reach states of being that are desirable in their own right.

From these definitions of the two virtues laid out, there are some connections to be between the two. However, Aristotle himself will place a barrier between the two, making them completely different from one another, albeit with one minor relation. For the relationship between Techne and Phronesis, it is true that they both deal with ends, specifically a beneficial end. Wherein the goal of Techne is the creation of a man-made object, or in regards to rhetoric, to the persuasion of an audience, both of which benefit the doer, for no one would create an object that harms them nor would they persuade an audience against themselves. While Phronesis is involved with the process of bringing about goodness to one's life, not about bringing sadness or any other negative outcome. However, it is within this slight similarity that Aristotle makes a distinction between the two virtues. Aristotle writes that "action and making are different kinds of thing"⁷, meaning that the process of Techne, making, is fundamentally different than that of Phronesis, acting. Since there is a distinction between the ways in which these two virtues are exercised then there certainly is a complete difference between these virtues. For Techne to be properly exercised one must involve themselves in making pieces of art, whilst following the given logic of their craft in order to make something

⁷ Aristotle *Ethics* 6-5

beautiful in its aesthetic or usefulness. While to exercise Phronesis, one must act in a way, forming connections with people, training for jobs, and volunteering, that shall bring about complete goodness for themselves. There is no making involved with Phronesis, nor is there action involved with Techne in the sense of choosing situations to bring about goodness, signifying a true difference between the two virtues. Furthermore, according to Aristotle, there is a right and wrong way in Techne, while right and wrong are subjective for Phronesis. For Techne, there certainly is a wrong way to make a chair, a chair with only one leg will not hold, and much of the same can be said about the many other types of art. Meaning that there is a certain excellence⁸ required of Techne. Yet, for Phronesis the path that brings one man to goodness may not bring another man to the same state of being. Therefore, despite the initial similarity the two virtues have regarding their ends, they cannot be considered the same based on the differences in their process and their degree of excellence.

As far as these two virtues relate to another virtue laid out by Aristotle, Episteme, there is a distinction made that completely separates them all. Aristotle in his *Ethics* lays out a crucial key component to Episteme (or scientific knowledge) of which is the ability of demonstration, “Scientific knowledge is, then, a state of capacity to demonstrate,”⁹. That being so, both Techne and Phronesis are noted as lacking in the ability to demonstrate, because they deal with what is variable, “for that which can be scientifically known can be demonstrated, and art and practical wisdom deal with things that are variable,”¹⁰. Phronesis is variable of course from the different ways that people can find their way to goodness. While Techne is variable on the basis that despite the

⁸ Aristotle *Ethics* 6-5

⁹ Aristotle *Ethics* 6-3

¹⁰ Aristotle *Ethics* 6-3

fact that there are required rules per individual craft, one can still follow these rules and create pieces that vary in material and artistic expression. Showing that there is a strong distinction between Episteme, Techne, and Phronesis, making the three completely unique and stand-alone concepts.

The two virtues, Techne and Phronesis, both have two separate and exact definitions and ways in which they are exercised. Techne deals with what is created by man following the logical rules of a particular craft, while Phronesis deals with the individual path a man must take in order to secure themselves goodness, or a state that is desirable in it itself. Neither of these two virtues is in any way complicit to the other virtue of Episteme, showing that these three concepts stand out as separate concepts of thought.

Work Cited

- *Aristotle, Ethics*
- *Aristotle, Rhetoric*