

CHAPTER ONE

Valuable Particulars

One group of commentators whose discussion this essay joins includes John McDowell, Martha Nussbaum, Nancy Sherman, and Stephen G. Salkever. McDowell is an early contributor to the discussion. In “Virtue and Reason,” he claims that, for Aristotle, the cognitive component of ethical virtue is not knowledge of the applicability of a universal, a set of rules, or a code to a given situation, but perception of particulars as salient in the light of an uncodifiable view of how to live (1979, 331–350). According to Aristotle, McDowell says, the best generalizations about how to behave are only ‘for the most part’.¹ This implies that, according to Aristotle, how one should live is not codifiable. Moreover, the universality of law must be supplemented by appreciation of the particular case.² We have an uncodifiable view of how to live, however, one which issues in concerns which, due to uncodifiability, cannot be ranked. Instead, one’s uncodifiable view of how to live interacts with particular knowledge so that one concern or fact rather than another is seen as salient. According to McDowell, the important cognitive component of ethical virtue is this perception of particulars as salient in the light of one’s uncodifiable view of how to live.

In “The Discernment of Perception” (1985) and *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), Nussbaum joins the discussion. She maintains that, for Aristotle, the cognitive component of ethical virtue is not knowledge of universals or rules, but perception of particulars, that is, recognition of the salient features of complex, concrete situations (1990, 54–105). Though Aristotle does maintain that the person of practical

wisdom utilizes a rule or general account (*logos*) in decision making, the rule Aristotle has in mind is not intended to be authoritative for decision making (NE 1106b36–1107a2). For, according to her, Aristotle maintains that the standard of excellence is not a universal or rule, but is what the person of practical wisdom would decide and, in addition, the person of practical wisdom does not utilize a universal or rule in making his or her decisions. Instead, the decision requires discernment and the discernment is in the perception of particulars.³ The rule, thus, is not authoritative for decision making, but is instead a mere rule of thumb, a summary of particular past decisions which, because it is such, is useful in guiding us to perceive the salient features of particular cases.

In addition, in “Changing Aristotle’s Mind” and in *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum argues that emotions, for Aristotle, are forms of perception (Nussbaum and Putnam, 1992, 15–16).⁴ They have sorting or discriminatory power, as the accounts of the practical syllogism indicate. They lead or guide perception in situations requiring choice, as we can see from the fact that choice partakes both of intellect and of emotion (it is “desiderative deliberation or deliberative desire”) and from the fact that practical wisdom is interdependent with excellence of character (which is in part a disposition concerning emotion) (1986, 308).⁵

In *The Fabric of Character*, Sherman joins the discussion and argues that, according to Aristotle, the cognitive component of ethical virtue is not knowledge of the applicability of rules but is perception of ethical salience and that emotions are intentional states directed at articulated features of an agent’s environment through which we come to perceive particular circumstances, to recognize what is ethically salient (1989, chapter 2). For Aristotle, she maintains, ethical theories that begin with the justification of the decision to act begin too late since before making and justifying a decision, one must see that a situation calls for action, that is, one must see that the situation is ethically salient.⁶

Salkever adds his voice to the discussion in *Finding the Mean*. He argues that the cognitive component of ethical virtue is not deductively valid and necessary application of a scientific principle or a rule, but well-informed guessing, resting on a complex perception of the balance of importance and urgency likely to be best for us. Human goods are diverse and competing, as a number of examples indicate. Decisions require not the application of a rule, but the perception of an intelligent balance of the various competing goods (1990, chapter 3).⁷

The extent of the acceptance of this sort of interpretation of Aristotle’s view of the cognitive component of ethical virtue and of emotion is indicated by the passing supposition of it in works devoted not specifically to Aristotle but to other, related topics. In their book of

philosophical readings on emotion, for example, Cheshire Calhoun and Robert C. Solomon use Aristotle as their prime example of a philosopher according to whom emotions have a cognitive element, one for whom emotions are ways of conceiving particular situations (1984, introduction, part 1). For another example, in his generally positive treatment of Freud, Jonathan Lear criticizes Freud for treating an emotion as a quantity of energy rather than sharing Aristotle's view that an emotion is a rational orientation to the world (1990, 47–51). Lear supports his interpretation of Aristotle by referring to passages in the *Rhetoric* in which Aristotle states that emotions affect the framework through which we view the world, that is, that emotions affect our judgments.

It is not enough, however, to say that the cognitive component of ethical virtue and of emotion is the perception of particulars. People often have knowledge of the particulars of a certain situation without being practically insightful about it or having an emotional reaction to it. One may have even rather detailed knowledge of a situation without being practically insightful about it or emotionally responsive to it. Some additional kind of cognition is required. To denote that additional knowledge, McDowell, Nussbaum, and Sherman use the term 'salience'. We must, according to them, perceive salient particulars or the salience of particulars. Salkever denotes the additional knowledge by the term 'balance'. He maintains that we must perceive the balance of competing goods or that we must perceive the balance of importance and urgency among diverse, competing goods.

Aristotle does not use any term that might easily be translated as 'salience' or 'balance', however. So, we must ask how he would capture and explicate the insight that these terms contain. I maintain, and will argue in the chapters that follow, that, according to Aristotle, what we must perceive in the particulars in each case is their value, that is, we must perceive the particulars as good or as beautiful.

Consider, for example, McDowell's interpretation. According to McDowell, the best generalizations about how to behave are only 'for the most part' according to Aristotle. They are not universals, sets of rules, or codes. Hence the cognition of particulars that is central to ethical virtue according to Aristotle is not knowledge of the applicability of a universal, a set of rules, or a code to particulars. Instead, it is awareness of particulars in the light of our 'for the most part' understanding of how to live. McDowell calls that understanding an "uncodifiable view of how to live." The central cognitive component of ethical virtue according to Aristotle then is perception of particulars as salient in the light of an uncodifiable view of how to live (1979, 331–350).

Why assume, however, that the alternative to universals or rules is an unspecifiable or uncodifiable view? McDowell's arguments for this alternative come largely from Wittgenstein (1979, 336–342). There is some important similarity between Wittgenstein and Aristotle. They both reject the centrality of platonic universals, for example. However, it seems more reasonable to think of Aristotle and Wittgenstein as inhabiting the same broad region of thought regarding the limited usefulness of universals than as having the identical view of it. What if Aristotle thinks that there is a specifiable principle that guides our thought but is not an ordinary universal, rule, or code? In my view, this is exactly what he thinks. The good (i.e., good in general) is not univocal, according to Aristotle, but equivocal by analogy. To know the good (i.e., to know good in general) is to know something universal—specifically, it is to know a certain analogy. However, the analogy is an imprecise analogy, one that shows up differently and unexpectedly in different cases. Hence, we can know the analogy, which is universal, without knowing how good will show up in different cases, that is, how it will be instantiated in different particulars. This is part of what it means to say that good is an analogical *equivocal* (since, of course, not all analogies are equivocal).

I will explain and argue for this interpretation of Aristotle's understanding of the good in the chapters that follow. I will claim that how good is instantiated depends, more significantly than in the case of ordinary universals, on the nature of the particulars in which it is instantiated. Good means completion according to Aristotle, I will argue, and completions of things different in kind are different from each other in unexpected ways. The unexpectedness results from the fact that completion is relative to wholes and wholes according to Aristotle are not reducible to their parts (nor properties of wholes to the properties of their parts).

McDowell's argument is marred as well by insufficient reflection on what Aristotle might mean by 'for the most part'. Why are many claims in Aristotle's ethics true only for the most part? Is it because what we must know if we are to have ethical virtue is uncodifiable or unspecifiable? We cannot simply assume that this is the reason. Instead, as I will argue, Aristotle believes that regarding many of our claims, we have two alternatives: the claims either will be true only for the most part or, if we correct them, they will be universal but so sketchy as to have limited usefulness. This dual possibility is related to the fact that we can know good in its universal aspect without knowing how it will be instantiated in particular cases.

My point is that the fact that many of the claims made in ethics are only 'for the most part'; that the virtuous person's deliberations are not

guided by ordinary universals or rules; and that ethics is imprecise, admits of more than one explanation. We need not jump immediately to ‘salience’ in the light of ‘uncodifiability’, as McDowell does. Aristotle has, as I will argue, more concrete and detailed reasons for believing that ethical claims are imprecise.

In “Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle’s Ethics,” McDowell works out a new version of his approach to Aristotle’s views. We may say that what we perceive or grasp is a universal, he says, so long as we do not say that the perception can be detached from a well-developed psychological or motivational state or that the universal we perceive can be perceived in an act of pure intellect (1996, 23). What the practically wise person grasps or cognizes is doing well, McDowell says.⁸ However, there is no blueprint for doing well that can simply be applied, deductively, to cases, first, because there is no blueprint and, second, because what’s required for application is not deduction, but discernment of particulars (1996, 21–23).

Between the blueprint picture and the idea of a universal that is not detachable from a certain psychological state, however, there is a lot of middle ground. If a blueprint is a universal whose application to particulars is simple—McDowell describes the application as “straightforward” and “mechanical” (1996, 21)—then McDowell seems on the right track. Aristotle states that we must see what is appropriate to the situation rather than simply applying an art or rule (*NE* 2.2 1104a7–10). This suggests that the application is not simple. The fact that the application is not simple, however, does not imply that what is applied cannot be detached from a certain psychological state.

Instead, it could be a universal whose application in specific cases is complex. It could be, as I have already suggested, that one can grasp the universal without knowing how the universal shows up in particular cases, that one can know the universal without knowing what its instances or applications are like. This could be the case if the universal involved were such that its applications were quite different, one from another, and different in ways that are not predictable or deducible but in ways that can only be known through perception or experience. This is Aristotle’s view as I understand it and this interpretation of it fits with his remark in 1.6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that knowledge of the good would not contribute much to ones discussions of the particular, human good and, as well, that knowledge of the particular, human good is possible even without the more precise knowledge of the universal good. To live well in general is to live a life that is good overall. To grasp what that would be is to grasp one’s good overall. Good is a concept that one can know in its universal aspect without knowing much at all about it

in its particular instances or applications. Moreover, it is a concept that one can know, through experience or perception, in its particular instances or applications without knowing anything explicit about it in its universal aspect.

Moreover, on this interpretation it could also be the case that deduction *is* a component of the practically wise person's cognition regarding decisions but that what is more unique to the practically wise person's cognition and what is more complex is not deduction but knowledge of the particular premise of the deduction. One reason for the uniqueness and the complexity is that, as I have already stated, according to Aristotle, good is an imprecise analogical equivocal.

Similarly, Nussbaum's view that the "standard of excellence" is not a universal but is the person of practical wisdom is too extreme. Between the view that the practically wise person consults a simple universal and the view that, instead, we consult the person of practical wisdom there is a lot of ground. Perhaps, instead, we consult a universal—a universal that guides our thought—but still must be sensitive in our discernment of its application to particulars. Moreover, perhaps we consult persons of practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, not because they are, simply, the standard. Instead, we consult them because they are the ones who, because they are sensitive in the discernment of the value of particulars, perceive how the standard shows up in diverse particular circumstances. As a result, they are a standard for us in cases in which we ourselves do not perceive how the standard shows up. This is Aristotle's view as I understand it. According to him, what we must perceive in the particulars in each case is their value, that is, we must perceive the particulars as good or as beautiful. Moreover, value is a universal that we can know in its universal aspect without knowing much at all about it in its particular instances. Good is an imprecise analogical equivocal. Knowledge of its applicability to particulars is complex and requires sensitivity. I shall argue for this view in the chapters that follow.