

The Roles of Sunesis and Gnome in Eudaimonist Practical Reasoning

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1 Introduction

Aristotle's account of practical reasoning is often thought of as captured in the concept of *phronêsis*, or practical wisdom. *Phronêsis*, however, is not the only intellectual virtue. Alongside it, Aristotle also notes the virtues of *sunesis* and *gnômê*. In this paper, I aim to address a conspicuous blind spot in the literature on Aristotelian ethics by explicating a neo-Aristotelian conception of *sunesis* and *gnômê* and demonstrating their roles in eudaimonist practical reasoning broadly construed. The paper proceeds in two parts. First, I offer a brief neo-Aristotelian account of practical reasoning. And second, I give an account of *sunesis* and *gnômê* that examines how they are presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics* but situates them in the neo-Aristotelian framework of Part One.

2 Neo-Aristotelian Practical Reasoning

Eudaimonist practical reasoning is typically associated with Aristotle. Aristotle's account of practical reasoning is often thought of as summed up by his concept of *phronêsis*, which is usually translated as practical wisdom or excellence in deliberation. The person who has *phronêsis*, called the *phronimos*, recognizes what course of action would be virtuous, which is why *phronêsis* is sometimes referred to as an integrative virtue and a meta-virtue (Henderson, 2024; Lapsley, 2021; Kristjansson & Fowers, 2024). As Katja Vogt notes, "Much Aristotle-inspired ethics proceeds [...] as if, among the excellences of thought, deliberation, and its excellence, *phronêsis*, needed to be studied almost in isolation" (2017, p. 128). Yet, *phronêsis* is not the only virtue of thinking. Alongside it, Aristotle also notes *sunesis* and *gnômê*.¹ Vogt translates *sunesis* "as a kind of critical comprehension" and *gnômê* as "a kind of sympathetic consideration" (2017, p. 166). While *sunesis* and *gnômê* are virtues of thinking, they are unlike *phronêsis* in that they are not concerned with one's own actions in a first-order way. Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe group *sunesis* and *gnômê* together as "critical" virtues of intelligence, but given typical divides between practical and theoretical reasoning, we might be prone to think of them as virtues of theoretical intelligence. That distinction, though, is the rub: the theoretical is the practical.

Despite their clear inclusion in Aristotle's theory of practical reasoning (tantamount to his theory of ethics), it remains the case that neither *sunesis* nor *gnômê* receives hardly any

¹ Thank you to Katja Vogt for bringing my attention to these virtues of thought as they relate to my argument.

attention in the secondary literature.² Aristotle introduces them in *NE* VI and says of both—alongside wisdom (*phronêsis*) and intelligence (*nous*)—that they “have as their objects what comes last, and particulars; and it is on being able to discriminate in the field in which wisdom operates (*einai peri hōn ho phronimos*) that being a comprehending person, and one of good sense, or sympathy, depends, for reasonable responses are common to all good qualities in their other-regarding (*pros allon*) aspect” (VI.11, 1143a28-33). In this brief passage it’s clear Aristotle means for *sunesis* and *gnōmē* to have practical significance in the realm of deliberation—they are intellectual virtues that function in the same realm that the standard intellectual virtue *phronêsis* functions—but the upshot is that (a) both virtues make sense of particulars and (b) both are other-regarding.

What other-regarding particulars, then, do *sunesis* and *gnōmē* make critical sense of?³ Aristotle says *sunesis* is the comprehension of “the things one might puzzle and deliberate about” (VI.10, 1143a7). Excellence in comprehension is being able to judge rightly within the domain in which *phronesis* operates; in VI.10 Aristotle locates that judging comprehension in judging what other people say in ethical matters, which certainly covers the other-regarding aspect of the virtue. *Gnōmē* is having good sense, particularly a sense of others and their situations, hence the translation of *gnōmē* as sympathy.⁴

Now, a standard examination of practical reasoning takes it “to proceed from a description of a decision situation, one that is treated as simply given, to a practical conclusion” (Millgram, 2005, p. 175). In other words, the focus is on the conclusion rather than the description. A eudaimonist conception of practical reasoning entails that excellent deliberation is tough, but it also entails that grasping the *about* of deliberation is tough, too. On this view, *sunesis* and *gnōmē* are practical because *phronêsis* requires accurate comprehension of the world in which one acts. Therefore, we are morally involved and

² Systematic commentaries on *NE* mention *sunesis* and *gnōmē*, but outside of translators’ commentaries the virtues are mentioned rarely. Notable exceptions include Gottlieb (2021) and Vogt (2017), but even in these cases neither Vogt nor Gottlieb provide an extended explication of how these virtues figure into Aristotle’s ethical thought.

³ The introduction or, rather, *recognition* of the range of intellectual virtues raises the question of whether the unity of the virtues holds in their case, as it arguably does (or doesn’t) in the case of character virtues. I am cautiously supportive of the thesis that the practically wise person necessarily possesses not just *phronêsis* but also *sunesis* and *gnōmē*. The possibility remains open as to whether *phronêsis* remains a kind of meta-virtue over *sunesis* and *gnōmē*.

⁴ There are some aspects of Aristotle’s thought that might pose problems for what I want to show with *sunesis* and *gnōmē*, namely Aristotle’s point that they are acquired naturally with age (ergo the intelligence and good sense of elders). Further, Aristotle’s brief writing on *sunesis* makes it sound like the virtue is concerned with evaluating the testimony of others. The account I’m offering should be conceived of as neo-Aristotelian because some of what follows under the conceptual headings of *sunesis* and *gnōmē* go farther than Aristotle’s conceptions of these virtues.

engaged in practical reasoning even in moments of inaction because, as Iris Murdoch stresses, our practical reasoning acts contextually.

By the *about* of deliberation, I mean getting clear on the particulars of one's situation, which entails more than listing or noting the particulars. Murdoch writes that "we can only move properly in a world that we can see, and what must be sought for is vision" (1992, p. 303). Moving properly—practically reasoning well—entails "seeing" the world with which one is faced, because, again, practical reasoning takes place within one's spheres. The details that are the object of our moral sense are, then, details of the world. Yet, as I said above, the details of the world are not just given.⁵ They are, in Murdoch's words, not handed to us on a plate, which is why the activity of practical reasoning includes apprehension and description.

3 The Roles of *Sunesis* and *Gnōmē* in Practical Reasoning

Having outlined a view of eudaimonist practical reasoning, we can return to Aristotle, *sunesis*, and *gnōmē*. With *sunesis*, I hope to capture the side of practical reasoning concerned with moral apprehension. With *gnōmē*, I hope to capture the side of practical reasoning concerned with moral salience. As mentioned, I am taking some liberties with these virtues of thinking but the following articulations of them that I offer retain the distinct spirit of each virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* and retain the larger theoretical intent Aristotle has in showing how practical reasoning entails more than *phronēsis*.

In *NE* VI.10, Aristotle says that *sunesis* is like seeing the point. It is not, as is *phronēsis*, concerned with providing prescriptive acts. Instead, it is concerned with the kind of thought entailed by mental activities like discriminating, parsing, discerning, and grasping. *NE* VI.10 makes it seem that *sunesis* is employed only when evaluating statements made by others about the subject matter of *phronēsis*, but there are two reasons to think that *sunesis* is more expansive than that. First, there is no strict delimiting of the virtue to that object by Aristotle, and second, the other uses of the term by Aristotle and Plato seem to suggest that its meaning is more expansive.⁶ Aristotle uses the term in a few places in the

⁵ Cf. Bakhurst (2011), Crary (2016), McDowell (1996; 2018), and Sellars (1956) on the so-called Myth of the Given: the idea that our perceptual experiences are non-subject dependent.

⁶ Plato uses the term in a number of places, most notably in the *Cratylus* where *sunesis* is frequently grouped with *epistēmē* (e.g., 412a). It also appears in a grouping with *nous*, *technē*, and *epistēmē* in the *Philebus* (19d). In *Republic* II, the dog, as a philosophical animal, is said to exercise *sunesis* as a criterion of what is its friend and what is its enemy (376b)—it discerns or defines its friend based off of its knowledge of the person. And in *Lovers*, spurious or not, the author writes that *sunesis* is a grasp of the crafts rather than the mere handiwork of the crafts (135b).

Nicomachean Ethics and once in the *Politics*.⁷ In *NE* VIII.12, Aristotle uses *sunesis* to describe the phenomenon of children coming to feel affection for their parents after “they have acquired comprehension, or the capacity to perceive (*sunesin ē aisthēsin labonta*)” (1161b26-27). In this instance of *sunesis* it is compared with perception and the emphasis is clearly on a grasping relationship of circumstances, rather than a discernment of another’s testimony.

In *NE* X.9, Aristotle connects *sunesis* with discrimination (*orthos*) using musical discernment as an example: “as if the selection [of good laws] were not itself a matter for acumen (*sunesis*), and correct discrimination (*orthos logos*) not the greatest task, as in questions of music. For it is those experienced in each sphere [of both music and politics] that discriminate between the relevant products correctly, and understand by what means and in what way they are brought to completion, and what sorts of things harmonize with what” (1181a18-22). There are two important implications to draw from this passage. First, note Broadie and Rowe’s translation of *sunesis* as acumen. Martha Nussbaum, though talking about perception (*aisthēsis*), writes that the necessity of experience in the accurate use of capacities like perception suggests that those abilities are not “mysterious *sui generis*” abilities (1994, p. 68). Instead, the necessity of experience belies the fact that such capacities are trained, as is a person’s domain-acumen.

The second implication is found in the relationship between *sunesis* and *orthos logos*. Jessica Moss argues that Aristotle’s famed *orthos logos*—sometimes identified as *phronēsis*—should be considered as a correct explanatory account; it is not a capacity itself, but rather something an object of Aristotelian rationality (Moss, 2014). In the *NE* X, Aristotle demonstrates the way that correct explanatory accounts—a grasp of how things hang together, what goes into producing results, and so on—are themselves objects of *sunesis*, reminding his readers that *sunesis* is a virtue of rationality in its own right. *NE* X, as in *NE* VIII, makes it clear that *sunesis* is a broader intellectual activity than just judging the sensibility of someone’s speech. *Sunesis* is, instead, concerned with grasping the aspects of a given domain, which we might be inclined to say is reducible to a grasping of the domain in general.

We can understand *sunesis* as the part of practical reasoning that is concerned with accurate apprehension of the practical domain. If *sunesis* is comprehension and excellence in comprehension is something like correct discernment (*orthos logos*), then what is necessary for correct discernment? What Aristotle seems to be suggesting is that at least oftentimes the virtue of *sunesis* is exhibited in the accurate grasp of situations, people, and tasks, which

⁷ In *Politics* IV.4.1291a, Aristotle says that deliberation is a functional aspect (*ergon*) of political comprehension (*sunesis politikēs*).

implies having the cognitive resources to facilitate such correct discernment. There are three conclusions inlaid there that I want to draw out. First, *sunesis* could be called a sort of perception. Second, *sunesis* involves non-actional attention. Third, *sunesis*, as the enabling intellectual virtue of correct discernment, requires having appropriate sense-making conceptions, which often have linguistic backing.

The connection of *sunesis* with perception is readily present in Aristotle's writing. *Sunesis* is seeing the point; *sunesis* is seeing two creatures *as* one's parents. In instances of practical reasoning, it is essential that when we look to our domains of action, we "see" them accurately. For example, if we're met with a neighbor that rarely looks us in the eye and can barely muster a few gruff words of greeting, we can comprehend them in a variety of ways. We might see them as curmudgeonly, or we might see them as shy, or we might seem them as shell-shocked by grief. Our perception of our neighbor entails a comprehension of them that can be correct or mistaken; the virtue of *sunesis* is what enables us to discern correctly. Correct comprehension requires noticing. Noticing what needs to be noticed is an enabling ability of being able to comprehend it accurately.⁸

Finally, when we think sunetically we rely on having a conceptual apparatus that permits correct comprehension. Without a grasp, for instance, of the content of the concept "suffering," we may be unable to comprehend the experience of animals in factory farms let alone form accurate judgments of discernment or comprehension about factory farming. Practically, if we are unable to form accurate judgments about a context like factory farming, then we are principally impaired in our ability to reason *phronetically* about whether or not, e.g., to eat meat in a given context.

Instances of sunetic reasoning do not, therefore, terminate in acting or recognizing the right action. Instead, sunetic reasoning, as discerning comprehension, provides us with cognitive resources: ways of seeing the world, the grasp of relationships, understanding of how details bear on judgments, and so on. Ergo, by paying attention to other virtues of practical reasoning, we can recognize the way that a eudaimonist view of practical reasoning exceeds just agential considerations.

⁸ There is a growing body of literature aimed at thinking through how attentional patterns and biases result in errors of reasoning and moral failures, cf. Bomarrito (2013), Gardiner (2022), Johnson (2024), Munton (2023), and Whitley (2022). This work often touches on work by philosophers like Sebastian Watzl (2011; 2017) who calls his account of attention a "priority structure account" in which attention "is the prioritizing of information" in order to "make it more useful for the organism" (2023, p. 3).

How does *gnōmē* fit into the picture? In *NE* VI.11, Aristotle links *gnōmē* with *sungnōmē*. In its most general sense, *gnōmē* is judgment, often denoting one's opinion or view.⁹ However, *sungnōmē* has a characterful connotation in which one judges kindly or with sympathy. For instance, *sungnōmē*, as sympathetic judgment, is correctly recognizing when it is appropriate to offer forgiveness or leniency. In *Politics* 3.1287a *gnōmē* is used to connote a best judgment that is made according to experience rather than established law, but in *Politics* 4.1295a, *gnōmē* is used to connote tyrannical rule, where best judgment now seems to take on a character of despotic whimsy. If the virtue of thought expressed in *NE* VI.11 is having an appropriate sense of moral judgments, such as knowing when and how the spirit of the law ought to overrule the letter of the law or knowing when to see another person with forgiving sympathy, then what constitutes such a virtue? I think *gnōmē*, as other-regarding and focused on particulars, can be understood as being an extra-agential sense of moral salience.¹⁰

To make that case, we can look to *NE* III where Aristotle discusses voluntary action. *Sungnōmē* makes an appearance in III.1 in which Aristotle says that sympathy for others depends on a grasp of particulars. The motivating force behind III.1 is that what is done counter-voluntarily sometimes deserves sympathy and pity on the part of judging parties, which, says Aristotle, has implications for lawmaking (1109b30-36). The framing of the chapter thus relates to the instances where *gnōmē* is invoked to mean an ability to recognize the spirit of the law and the times when the spirit ought to supersede the letter. After saying that sympathy depends on particulars, Aristotle says that the person who acts counter-voluntarily does so out of ignorance of some particular, which he lists as: “the matter of who is acting, what he is doing, in relation to what or affecting what, sometimes also with what (as for example with a tool), what the action is for (e.g. saving someone), and how it is done (e.g. gently or vigorously)” (1111a4-7). Ignorance of the particulars is what Aristotle says sometimes leads to sympathetic counter voluntary action, but grasp of the particulars is also what cuts across *phronēsis*, *sunesis*, and *gnōmē* in VI.11: “it is on being able to discriminate in the field in which wisdom operates (*phronimos*) that being a comprehending person (*sunetos*), and one of good sense (*eugnōmōn*), or sympathy (*sungnōmē*), depends” (1143a29-31). Grasping particulars is therefore the object of each of these virtues of

⁹ Most often, Plato uses the term to talk of someone giving their opinion or judgment. In an interesting example within the *Menexenus*, however, Plato talks of *gnomai* being enslaved by ruling forces so that no one dared challenge Darius's rule (240a).

¹⁰ I point out extra-agential because having a sense of moral salience is a relevant aspect of certain accounts of *phronēsis*, such as McDowell's in “Virtue and Reason”: “A conception of how to live shows itself, when more than one concern might issue in action, in one's seeing, or being able to be brought to see, one fact rather than another as salient” (1998, pp. 68-69). On McDowell's account, the sensitivity to salience that *phronēsis* brings to the table is agential in kind—it is knowing what is salient in deliberation.

thought, but where *phronēsis* is concerned with deliberation and *sunesis* is concerned with comprehension, *gnōmē* is concerned with a sense of what morally matters: an accurate discernment of what is reasonable (*epieikous esti krisis orthē*) (1143a21-22). Allow me to borrow an example from Cora Diamond to parse out the way these intellectual virtues might operate distinctly:

Suppose (to take an actual case) someone says in the course of a discussion of experimentation on animals that one of the reasons it is wrong to experiment on “human infants” [...] a reason not applicable to animals, is that doing so will deprive society of the various valuable contributions they might be able to make if they grew up to normal adulthood. We appeal, this person says, to just such considerations when we argue for the use of taxes to support public education, and similar benefits can be appealed to here. This argument clearly will not apply to animals, he points out, because they cannot go on to make the relevant sorts of contributions; they cannot become teachers, producers of useful goods, composers, or participants in public debate. (1988, p. 274)

Diamond’s argument is not just to illustrate the way her conclusion about animal experimentation proceeds orthogonally from her discussants, but that the premises are orthogonal to each other at the outset. Both Diamond and her discussant agree that human babies ought to not be put in cages and experimented on, which suggests perhaps they are proceeding in the same direction. Yet, the moral wrongness of experimenting on caged human babies for Diamond is *not* that such a practice is economically impractical, but rather that it is inhumane. What Diamond sees as morally reasonable in a discussion of caged babies is different entirely from her discussant and in that case I am inclined to say that what Diamond demonstrates is a gnometic sensibility that her opponent clearly lacks, even if practically they both think babies ought to not be caged.

Given that *sunesis* and *gnōmē* are both concerned with particulars and both are other-regarding, it stands to reason that there may be other overlap in how they manifest in practical thinking. For instance, attention is likely a precondition for the excellent exercise of both *sunesis* and *gnōmē* because both require noticing what bears on the context for thinking. However, where *sunesis* is a kind of intelligence at comprehending the world, *gnōmē* is a sense of reasonableness that informs our sympathy. On the view I am sketching, excellence in practical reasoning takes on a fuller characterization than just understanding what factors impinge on the virtuous exercise of agency. Ergo, the practically wise person is not able to just think phronetically, but also sunetically and gnometically.

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