5
TECHNÊ IN ARISTOTLE’S TAXONOMY OF KNOWLEDGE

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5.1 Introduction
Aristotle presents craft (technê) as a distinct kind of knowledge. In this chapter I offer first a general outline of his account of craft, as it is presented within his classification of knowledge in the Nicomachean Ethics (EN). I then analyse this account in view also of other works of his, before homing in on the contrast between technê and practical knowledge or phronêsis, which is likely to strike readers as the most interesting and problematic aspect of Aristotle’s taxonomy.¹

5.2 The place of technê within knowledge
In EN VI Aristotle accounts for the intellectual virtues. There are several of these because there are different kinds of intellect. Aristotle (EN 1139a9–12) follows the philosophical method described in De Anima II.4 (415a18–20) which gives priority in definition to the capacity’s object. That is,

P1 A capacity and its activities are determined by its distinctive object.

P1 helps Aristotle distinguish first rational from non-rational capacities: rational capacities are concerned with truths. There are then two kinds of rational capacity: one concerned with necessary and eternal truths, another with contingent truths. The first, theoretical reason, has its virtue theoretical knowledge (epistêmê).² The contingent truths are the remit of practical and productive reason, the practical sort dealing with action (praxis) and the productive with production (poiêsis). These two are mutually exclusive, but they do not exhaust the class of contingent truths, since they are restricted to those truths that are under our influence. Contingent truths on Mars are, at least in Aristotle’s world, the remit of neither practical nor productive knowledge. Our distinctions give us the picture in Figure 5.1.

Aristotle views the virtues as developed dispositions or states (hexeis), so the intellectual virtues are states of the intellectual capacities.³ As they are states of reason (logos), he thinks that they are also accompanied by an account or reason (logos).⁴ A logos could in principle be any statement or verbal expression, but several passages make it clear that Aristotle has in mind an account or explanation of what the technê is about.⁵ As the virtues are excellences of reason,
the account must also be correct; if the account were false, reason would clearly not have been perfected in possessing this account.

A general formula is then available for all the different virtues of intellect.

**P2** A virtue of reason = a state of reason concerned with X accompanied by a true account (logos) of X.

**P2** will then be differentiated according to the value of X, given **P1**. In this way we arrive at the following characterisations of the three kinds of knowledge:

Theoretical knowledge = a theoretical state of reason concerned with eternal truths accompanied by a true account.

Practical knowledge = a practical state of reason accompanied by a true account.

Productive knowledge = a productive state of reason accompanied by a true account.

### 5.3 The definition of technê

It is in *ENVI* 4 that we learn how **P2** applies to productive knowledge, making it different from both practical and theoretical knowledge:

**T1** What admits of being otherwise includes what is produced and what is achieved in action. Production and action are different; about them we rely also on [our] popular distinctions. And so the state involving an account (logos) and concerned with action is different from the state involving an account and concerned with production. Nor is one included in the other; for action is not production, and production is not action. Now building, for instance, is a craft (technê), and is essentially a certain state involving an account concerned with production; there is no craft that is not a state involving an account concerned with production, and no such state that is not a craft. Hence a craft is the same as a state involving a true account concerned with production. Every craft is concerned with coming to be, and the exercise of the craft is also considering (theôrein) how something that admits of being and not being comes to be, something whose principle is in the producer and not in the product. For a craft is not concerned with things that are or come to be by necessity; nor with things that are by nature, since these have their principle in themselves. Since production and action are different, craft must be concerned with production, not with action. In a way craft and fortune are concerned with the same things, as Agathon says: ‘Craft was
A craft, then, as we have said, is a state involving true reason concerned with production. Lack of craft is the contrary state involving false reason and concerned with production. Both are concerned with what admits of being otherwise.

You may ask if technē according to this definition is primarily concerned with the production or the product. The Greek word ergon, like the English ‘work’, can be employed for the outcome of the craft (1106b9) but may also indicate the activity of production. Thus we may distinguish between health, for example, and healing, and ask which is the primary concern of medicine. Possibly we could read the definition of technē as saying that the state is concerned with the product and the account with the production, or the other way around, or both could be concerned with either the product or the production.

It is plainly implausible to think that the technē is concerned exclusively with the product: a state that was able to produce an object and give an account of the product itself but not of how one brings it about would surely not qualify as a craft. Being able to say what a house is as well as being able to conjure one up wouldn’t make you an architect: you might be an articulate magician. And when Aristotle says in our passage that ‘Every craft is concerned with coming to be, and the exercise of the craft is also considering (theōrein) how something that admits of being and not being comes to be’, he is surely referring to the craftsman’s consideration of how the product comes about. The thought seems to be that since the product is something contingent on the craftsman, he reasons about how to bring it about. Here the craftsman’s reasoning would correspond in the ethical realm to the deliberation of the practically wise (the phronimos) about how to bring about the desired end. And just as such deliberation is proper to the phronimos, so also correct reasoning about how to bring about the product is characteristic of the craftsman.

It would be a mistake, however, to say that the craftsman is concerned with reasoning about the production rather than the product itself. For his reasoning is premised on a correct understanding of the product. Just as we deliberate only about the ends that we desire as good, so the craftsman reasons only about how to bring about the product typical of his craft. The Metaphysics gives us a clearer picture of how the product works as the starting point for the craftsman’s reasoning:

T2 From craft come the things whose form is in the soul of the producer – and by form I mean the essence of each thing and the primary substance … For example, health is the account in the soul, the scientific knowledge [of the form]. So the healthy thing comes to be when the doctor reasons as follows: since health is this, necessarily if the thing is to be healthy this must be present – for example, a uniform state – and if the latter is to be present, there must be heat, and he goes on, always thinking like this, until he is led to a final ‘this’ that he himself is able to make. Then the process from this point onward, toward health, is called production … . Of comings-into-being and processes, one part is called understanding (noêsis) and the other producing (poiêsis) – what proceeds from the starting-point and form is understanding, what proceeds from the final stage of understanding is producing.

Aristotle is clear that the doctor’s understanding of health is the starting point of her reasoning. The craft here is the reasoned ability to set in motion changes that lead to the goal of health. In the light of T2 we might, then, understand the definition in ENVI.4 as saying that the craft
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is the developed ability, hence state, to produce on the basis of reasoning the changes that are instrumental in bringing about a certain goal. We can then understand the proper object of the craft as the production (poiēsis) given that the product will be factored into the specification of production. Medicine, for example, will then have healing as its proper object, on the understanding that healing is the process that brings about health.

However, a noteworthy feature of the definition of technē in T1 is that Aristotle does not say that craft is a state concerned with production, though it is no doubt also that, as we have just seen. Rather he says that craft is a productive state. The difference may reflect a realisation that saying that craft is knowledge of production may not be sufficient to single out an ability to make something. For one might have a theoretical grasp of a kind of production without having the ability oneself to carry it out. As some might say today, having knowledge that this is how to make something may not be sufficient for having the knowledge of how to make that thing oneself.8 But what Aristotle wants to capture is exactly the sort of knowledge that enables one to make something oneself. ‘Productive’ therefore qualifies the state rather than (just) the object. The aspect of being able to account for what one is doing, the more ‘theoretical’ element, comes out rather in the account (logos) that accompanies the productive ability.

The question then arises about the relationship between the productive state and the account. Aristotle says that craft is a productive state ‘with’ (meta) a logos, but ‘with’ seems vague enough to allow for anything from conjunction to constitution. So one might take the account to be something merely added to the productive state, which can be understood independently of the account, or one could take the logos to be part of what grounds or makes the state the productive state it is. The evidence favours the second option.9 So in ENVI.13 (1144b17–30) Aristotle explains the parallel claim for virtue that it is a state with the right account (1144b27).

He contrasts the common view that virtue is in accordance with the correct account, arguing that it is possible to act in accordance with the correct account without knowingly doing so. Aristotle’s choice of with (meta) is supposed to contrast with in accordance with (kata) so understood. The action is with a correct account only if it is informed by it. That is to say, to be not just ‘in accordance’ with the right account but ‘with’ the right account, the account must be involved in a way that explains how or why the agent acts as he does. Analogously in the definition of craft, the productive state would be ‘with’ an account in that the craftsman is able to produce as he does because he has an account that tells him how to do so.

A similar picture emerges from Aristotle’s discussion of craft in Metaphysics IX.2. Here he distinguishes between two kinds of capacity (dunamis), those with (meta) a logos and those without (1046b1), all crafts being with an account. He argues that a capacity with an account, a rational (logikê) capacity, enables one to bring about opposite results because the logos shows the craftsman how to bring about either. So the doctor can kill or cure since the same account which tells her how to cure also incidentally tells her how to kill. Aristotle says that the ‘knowledge is a capacity by having the logos’ (1046b16; emphasis added). It is quite explicit then that it is primarily the account that grounds the craft’s characteristic productive ability.

If this is right, and the logos is part of what makes the state productive, one might ask, given that the circumstances of production differ from case to case, whether the logos is an account of what goes into making a product in particular circumstances or whether it is, rather, a general account of how to go about making a product of a certain sort. T2 doesn’t on its own help us answer this since the example of health and heat could either be taken to refer to a particular case of healing where heat is the way to achieve the aim in this particular situation or to a more general procedure. Aristotle in several places emphasises that a successful craftsman takes account of the particular circumstances. In Metaphysics I.1 he says that production concerns the individual, not the universal: for example, the doctor cures the individual human being, not
the universal human being (981a17–20). While the craftsman is distinguished from the merely experienced by having an account (logos) that enables him to explain and teach how to produce a certain outcome, it is clear that effective production also requires experience. So in EN we read that

T3 Nor is prudence about universals only. It must also acquire knowledge of particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars. That is why in other areas also some people who lack knowledge but have experience are better in action than others who have knowledge. For someone who knows that light meats are digestible and [hence] healthy, but not which sorts of meats are light, will not produce health; the one who knows that bird meats are light [and healthy] will be better at producing health. And since prudence is concerned with action, it must possess both [the universal and the particular knowledge] or the [particular] more [than the universal]. Here too, however, [as in medicine] there is a ruling [science].

EN VI.7 1141b15–23, transl. T. Inwe

I take Aristotle’s point to be not that experience is just added to the account, but that experience affects how the account is pitched. For example, that the account says not just that light meats are easy to digest but that that bird (etc.) meat is such meat. Experience works then to modulate the general information that the account gives the craftsman. An account which also gives us information that bird meat is light will enable us to act appropriately. Similarly, the doctor’s account of healing should not just give a general causal description of a disease and its remedies, but also of the stages of the disease and the correct timing and dosage of the administration of the medicine. 10 Technê is a general disposition to produce things, grounded, as we saw, in a logos. So if this account is too specific, its extendability to all relevant cases is threatened. The account needs then to be general in intent, but should still be couched in a manner that is applicable to individual circumstances. If the account is too general it gives insufficient practical information to act on. Experience helps make the account sufficiently fine-grained to be actionable.

5.4 Technê and practical wisdom: the distinctions

Much of what I have said so far about the elements of the definition of technê in ENVI.4 applies mutatis mutandis to practical wisdom. But Aristotle uses the definition in T1 also to distinguish technê from practical wisdom (phronêsis), as the sort of knowledge that is most similar to technê. Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapter, Plato, at least in some of his works, took phronêsis to be a kind of craft. Aristotle is keen to correct this mistake, not just from the point of view of getting technê right, but also more importantly for the purposes of the EN, to become clear about the distinctive features of phronêsis.

P1, as we saw, is the primary criterion for distinguishing capacities and their states. But this criterion can be seen to be at work in two different ways, giving us two different contrasts between technê and phronêsis.

(A) phronêsis is of an end without qualification (telos haplôs), while technê is of ‘an end in relation to something and of something’ (telos pros ti and timos);

(B) technê is of production and phronêsis is of action.

We have already come across (B) in T1. Here is the text in which both (A) and (B) are brought up:
It follows that prudence \([\textit{phronêsis}]\) is not science nor yet craft knowledge. It is not science, because what is achievable in action admits of being otherwise; and it is not craft knowledge, because action and production belong to different kinds. The remaining possibility, then, is that prudence is a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being. For production has its end in something other than itself, but action does not, since its end is acting well itself. That is why Pericles and such people are the ones whom we regard as prudent, because they are able to study what is good for themselves and for human beings.

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\textit{EN VI.5 1140b2–11, transl. Irwin}
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At first blush, one might have thought that (B) would render (A) superfluous: if \(\textit{phronêsis}\) and \(\textit{technê}\) have different genera of objects, and so different ends (\(\textit{telê}\)), there is no reason to state a contrast between a qualified and an unqualified end. More strongly, one might say that (A) and (B) are in tension with each other: if \(\textit{phronêsis}\) and \(\textit{technê}\) differ in terms of one dealing with a \(\textit{telos}\) unqualified which the other also deals with but in a qualified manner then it can’t also be the case that the two are dealing with two generically different ends. Let us, then, consider (A) and (B) in turn and see if these are genuine problems.

### 5.4.1 \textit{Technê}, ends and deliberation

First (A). One complication is that \(\textit{phronêsis}\) does not deal with the good \(\textit{haplôs}\) but the good \emph{for man}. Aristotle is clear that this is not the only good, since the good for humans, would be different from the good for fish, just as human health is different from piscine health. Nor is the human good the best good full stop, since man is not the best being in the cosmos; that would be god (\textit{EN VI.7 1141a22–29}). So one might say that \(\textit{phronêsis}\) too is about something (\(\textit{peri tinos}\) or \(\textit{tinos}\)) in the sense of concerning man or being of man, and \(\textit{phronêsis}\) for another species, if such a thing is possible, would be about what is good for that species.

In \textit{EN VI.5} Aristotle expresses the difference between the objects of \(\textit{technê}\) and \(\textit{phronêsis}\) in terms of the part–whole relationship: \(\textit{phronêsis}\) deliberates about what as a whole (\(\textit{holôs}\)) contributes to the good life, not as a part (\(\textit{kata meros}\)), as for example what contributes to health or strength (1140a26–28). However, it is also clear that this notion of the human good in general doesn’t preclude deliberating about some human good. The thought would seem to be that deliberation is not just about what the overall human good is, say happiness, but also about some human good in some situation, let’s say, whether to have a child or not. A limiting condition here is that there should be no \(\textit{technê}\) dealing with the issue. So it would seem right that there is no \(\textit{technê}\) for whether or with whom or when to have a child, but there would be a \(\textit{technê}\) for how to develop one’s strength or attain health, namely, the trainer’s or the physician’s art. However, there are several further issues arising from this contrast.

(1) Why doesn’t deliberating about when to have a child count as deliberation \(\textit{kata meros}\)? One reason might be that we can only decide on such issues in relation to the overall human good: you need to think about this decision in relation to the overall happiness and well-being of yourself and others. This suggestion seems to be consistent with the fact that there is no \(\textit{technê}\) of such matters. A \(\textit{technê}\) can be exercised without regard to whether it contributes to overall human goals. That is why there is a virtue of \(\textit{technê}\), as Aristotle says (\textit{EN 1140b21–22}). The decision whether to exercise the \(\textit{technê}\) in a given situation is an ethical one which lies outside the craft’s proper remit. So the condition that there should be no \(\textit{technê}\) covering the issue is not
ad hoc but touches on the very nature of practical deliberation: even when practical deliberation faces a limited question this question needs, directly or indirectly, to take into account its bearing on the overall human good.

(2) Another issue is whether Aristotle wants to accept that techne deliberates at all. In EN VI.7 1141b11 Aristotle says that it is the function (ergon) of the phronimos to deliberate well. This might create the impression that it is not also the function of the craftsman, though what Aristotle says does not exclude that the craftsman might incidentally engage in some deliberation. To be sure, deliberation may not be a feature of craft in the way it is for practical wisdom. However, we cannot ascribe too marginal a role to deliberation in techne, since Aristotle repeatedly illustrates ethical deliberation by technical examples. He says, for example, that a doctor does not deliberate whether his patient should be healthy or not, but whether, say, he should take walks or not (EE II.11, 1227b25–6; NE III.3, 1112b12–13).

The scholarly problem arises because of a claim in Physics II.9 (199b28–29) that ‘art does not deliberate’. Aristotle is here using an analogy with craft to argue for final causality in nature. He wants to say that it is no objection to this analogy that final causes operate in the arts as objects of a crafting mind, and not so in nature, since also ‘art does not deliberate’. Just how to take these words has been much debated. One option is to say that since Aristotle talks about the craft rather than the craftsman, he has in mind the rules and procedures that characterise the craft as such. At this level there is no deliberation, but that does not mean that a craftsman when applying the craft does not deliberate. The problem with this, however, is that Aristotle in Physics II.9 has just referred to how we do not in nature ‘see the moving thing having deliberated’. And here it would seem to be the particular thing that we would or, rather, would not have seen move. If, then, the comparison with craft is to be like for like, we should be thinking of the craftsman, not the craft as such. However, a modified version might be plausible: the craftsman qua craftsman does not deliberate since the large majority of cases are routine. Deliberation would then not be involved in what exercising the craft as such would be about, and that might be why Aristotle here chooses to refer to the ‘craft’ rather than the ‘craftsman’.

It is hard, perhaps, to avoid the impression that this is still an idealisation of what craftsmen do. However, what is noteworthy is that when Aristotle acknowledges the importance of the particular circumstances in the exercise of arts such as medicine or navigation, he says that they ‘fall under no craft or profession, but it is necessary for the practitioners themselves to consider what is appropriate (pros ton kairon) to the circumstances’ (EN II.2 1104a7–9). It would appear that Aristotle has in mind here not the sort of means-end reasoning we find described in T2. This we might take as a typical case of medical reasoning: when a patient suffers such and such, apply heat, etc. Here the doctor is following a routine procedure rather than deliberating. Rather deliberation would be when the doctor judges in this particular case that the patient’s fever is at a point where he has passed the critical stage and therefore this medicine rather than that will be efficacious. Or, in the nautical case, that the clouds are promising a storm of a magnitude that given that the ship’s cargo is of this weight and this value means that it is right to jettison this amount of the load. As far as the craft is concerned the practitioner is on his own when reasoning about such particular cases. This is not to say that being able to make such decisions is not part of your development as a craftsman. For example, we may take it that what experience particularly gives the craftsman is this ability to recognise and negotiate the salient features of particular situations. You don’t and can’t learn this in medical school but a good doctor can do it. There is a sense in which deliberating exceeds what is characteristic of the craft qua craft though it may be presupposed by the successful exercise of the craft in certain circumstances, and more so for some crafts than others. However, compared to practical wisdom, and this is
Aristotle’s main point in EN II.2, deliberation about particular decisions will play a much more limited role in the exercise of craft. In the same spirit we might take it that Aristotle in Physics II.9 wants to say that it is not a general feature of craftsmen qua craftsmen that they deliberate (in the way it is for the phronimos) and therefore there is no general contrast on this point between the teleology of craft and nature.

### 5.4.2 Technê, ends and production

It is right, Aristotle says in De Anima II.4 (416b23), ‘to call all things after their end’ (telos), and it is the ends of production and action that for Aristotle primarily serve to distinguish craft from practical knowledge. This distinction works in two ways for Aristotle in EN VI. Already in Chapter 2 he had pointed to the difference between the goals of production and action:

**T5** Thought by itself moves nothing; what moves us is goal-directed thought concerned with action. For this thought is also the principle of productive thought; for every producer in his production aims at some [further] goal, and the unqualified goal is not the product, which is only the [qualified] goal of some [production], and aims at some [further] goal. [An unqualified goal is] what we achieve in action, since acting well is the goal, and desire is for the goal.

EN VI.2 1139a37–b3

Here we might say that the difference lies in the extent to which the goals of production and action actually count as goals. Clearly a craft has a goal which is unqualified in relation to the production itself. Health is the goal of medicine as such, as we saw. Health is not a qualified goal of medicine, but it may be a qualified goal of a human being. We don’t produce the goals of production willy-nilly but only when we want to achieve some further goal. We only aim to produce health for example if we want to live or live well. The goal of production points then to a goal outside itself, the goal of action.

In reply to our earlier question about the relationship between the two distinctions between technê and phronêsis, (A) and (B), we can say that because the product is not such as to be an end without qualification, the production points to another kind of end, the end of action, which is an end without qualification. Here the craft’s end being an end with qualification does not mean being the same sort of end as the end of action, only qualified in a certain way, as one might say for example that a zebra is white only with qualification because it has black stripes whereas a swan is completely white. Rather the difference picks out the end of craft as an objectively different kind of thing from the good of practical wisdom, namely something that is such as to have only instrumental value. It should not surprise us, then, given distinction (A), that distinction (B) points to generically different kinds of objects for productive and practical knowledge.

There is, however, yet another way, way (C), of distinguishing the goals of production and action, which is to see whether the goal is fulfilled in the activity itself or outside of it. Here the concern is not, as earlier, with whether the goal once achieved is a goal unqualifiedly or not. Rather the point is that while the goal of production cannot be achieved (be it an unqualified goal or not) in the production itself, the goal of an action lies in the action itself, namely in the good performance of the action (eupraxia). So in T4 above Aristotle said:

The remaining possibility, then, is that prudence is a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a
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human being. *For production has its end in something other than itself, but action does not, since its end is acting well itself.*

The italicised lines can be read as saying that while the end of the production is something other than the production, the end of the action is just the action itself. So house-building aims at a house, which is something other than house-building in the sense explained in *Physics* III.1: while the house-building is ongoing the house is not yet there; when the house is finished the house-building is no longer. Production is a process (*kinêsis*) which is complete only at the end of it. An action meanwhile is an activity (*energeia*) which is complete at each moment it is taking place, that is to say it realises its end while it is happening.\(^{14}\) The activity of seeing is one example. Aristotle, to be sure, talks here not just of the activity itself as the end but the *good activity* (*eupraxia*), but we may take this to mean that an activity that is fully realised as the activity it is is also a good activity of its kind. Seeing fully is seeing well. In any case, the good activity is not the activity plus some other attribute, but a modality of the activity itself.

While these points are all relevant, it is not yet clear why we should accept the exclusiveness of Aristotle’s distinction. In particular, there seems no reason why an action should not also be a production or a production an action. After all, in many cases we act in order to achieve further ends, a point on which Aristotle’s account of deliberation is premised. We may act bravely in order to save the nation, or show kindness to make another person happy. Here the mere fact of a means–end relationship doesn’t turn our action into a production, though there may also be such cases. For example, you may by eating moderately set an example for your children so that they too become moderate. In this case, it would seem appropriate to judge your action by its effectiveness. On the other hand, we have cases of production that coincide with actions. In John Ackrill’s example, mending your neighbour’s fence may be returning a favour.\(^{15}\) Here the production itself constitutes, it seems, the return of the favour. Returning the favour is not a further result of fixing the fence. Given that one and the same activity here can instantiate both an action and a production, it may seem best to take the distinction to be one of how we *describe* activities, and not as a distinction between numerically different activities.\(^{16}\) We might say today that the same activity is an action *under one description* and a production under another; Aristotle would say that sometimes the production and the action are one in number, but different in being or definition.

In this vein, we could say that production and action pick out different *evaluative* aspects or bases of an activity, using the word ‘activity’ as neutral between ‘production’ and ‘action’. We evaluate an activity as a production when we focus simply on the value of the product, we assess it as an action by evaluating it in its own right. Take again Ackrill’s example: here what you do, fixing the fence, may be described as a production, and as such it is complete when the fence is in fine working order. But the same activity numerically may also be considered an action, returning a favour, which is complete only insofar as the neighbour is satisfied. If the neighbour had changed his mind about having a fence at all, or wanted it somewhere else, or a hedge instead, then we wouldn’t say that the favour had been returned, fine as the fence may be. So one and the same activity may be a failed action but a successful production. We might say that the aim of the production is only *per accidens* that of the action, since there is no guarantee that fixing the fence will return the favour. Vice versa, the aim of the action is only *per accidens* that of the production since if some other product had served the action better, returning the favour, we would have chosen to make that thing.\(^{17}\)

This evaluative difference may be captured by saying that the end of the production is outside, while the end of the action is internal to the activity. We evaluate the production on the
basis of the quality of the product. The value of the production lies in the product not in the production as such. In contrast, the value of the action lies in the action itself, that is in the attributes that belong to it as that kind of action, returning a favour, doing a kindness and so on. Nothing here is said about that action not also coinciding with a production or process or some other entity, but that is not the basis on which we evaluate it.

The evaluation of the production in relation to the product seems clear enough. But how we evaluate an action as good or bad is perhaps less clear. In EN II.4 Aristotle points to features that we take into account when evaluating an action which don’t feature in our assessment of a production:

T6 Again, the case of the crafts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the crafts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the things that happen in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge; secondly, he must choose the actions, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. These are not reckoned in as conditions of the possession of the crafts, except the bare knowledge; but as a condition of the possession of the virtues knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything, i.e. the very conditions which result from often doing just and temperate actions.

EN 1105a26–b5, transl. after W. D. Ross

One way of seeing the criteria of a virtuous action is in relation to the idea that the action is a manifestation of a certain character, a term we may here take to refer both to the moral character, that is the emotional dispositions, and the intellectual character, knowledge. A just action follows from a just character and is chosen knowing what is just. While there are ways you can describe an action independently of its relation to the agent, just as there are features of the product you can describe independently of the producer, these are not the features of the action that make it virtuous. That is not to say that the virtuous-making features of the action do not belong to the action as such, since being chosen or manifesting a character clearly are defining features of action, at least if action is taken in the strict sense that Aristotle seems to have in mind here. The contrast with craft is that when we assess the production we look not to the way the production realises the characteristics of the craftsman (except, Aristotle says, for the limited case of knowledge), but simply to the quality of the product. And the product is not the actuality of the craftsman, but that of the materials from which the product has been made, that is the goodness here is predicated of something other than the craftsman.

If this, at least roughly, is Aristotle’s account of the difference between production and action, how successful is it? One problem we may have with allowing action and production to be different descriptions of the same activity is that action and production seem to have not just different but mutually incompatible properties. So we might say that a production is necessarily extended in time, an action not so, or that the cause of a production has a cause (namely the goal) that lies outside of it, while the action has an internal goal. As incompatible, these properties seem to point to different subjects or activities. But then we have the problem again of understanding cases like fixing the neighbour’s fence. We should note, however, that generally Aristotle does allow things that are one in number to have mutually incompatible descriptions. For example, the same stretch of road goes both from Thebes to Athens and from Athens to
Thebes, the same activity is both teaching and learning, or perceiving and being perceived. It has
to be admitted that these cases are not themselves easy to understand, and that the opposition in
these cases is not obviously like that between an action and a production. It may be hard in the
end to resist Ackrill’s verdict that when it comes to the distinction between action and produc-
tion Aristotle was less clear than one could have wished.  

Notes

1  I am grateful to Tom Angier for many helpful comments on this chapter.
2  See *Metaphysics* VI.1.
3  Aristotle will sometimes mention states (*hexeis*) and capacities (*dunameis*) as alternatives. So at *EN* II.5
   1105b20 he asks which of state, capacities or affections (*pathê*) virtue is. He clarifies that the capacities
   (in this context) would be those in virtue of which we are able to suffer affections, while the states are
   those in virtue of which we are well or ill disposed toward the affections. It is clear then that the states
   here are states of the capacities.
4  One could imagine a rational state that does not involve being able to give a reason. However, even
   *nous*, the insight into first principles, grasps a definition, which only contrasts with *logos* in one sense of
   the word. Contrast *EN* 1142a25–6 and *APo* II.19 100b10 with *Metaph.* 1017b22, *Metaph.* 1030a6–7,
   and *Metaph.* XII 1075a1–4.
6  Irwin (1999).
7  Translation quoted from Reeve (2013) 147.
8  This being one question at stake in the debate about whether knowledge how can always be analysed
   in terms of knowledge that.
9  For this interpretation see Johansen (2017).
10  Of the sort we indeed find in the Hippocratic writings, *cf.* e.g. *Regimen in Acute Diseases* (Lloyd
    1978: 20–26) on the administration of gruel.
12  As argued by Broadie (1987).
13  So Aristotle uses *kairos* in the quotation, the Hippocratic word for the precise moment in the disease’s
   progression, in relation to which the doctor must judge his treatment.
14  Cf. for this reading, Reeve (2013: 143–144).
15  Ackrill (1978: 596).
17  As Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII. 9.1: ‘if a person chooses or pursues this for the sake of that,
   *per se* it is that that he pursues and chooses, but *per accidens* it is this. But when we speak without quali-
   fication we mean what is *per se*’.
18  See further Charles (1986).

Further reading

Angier (2010) offers an excellent overview of Aristotle’s understanding of *technê* and its importance to his
ethics. Johansen (2020) features articles on *technê* by leading scholars covering all periods of ancient phil-
osophy. S. Cuomo, *Technology and Culture in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press 2007, puts ancient theories of *technê* in their social and historical context.

References


