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WISDOM AS INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE: AQUINAS, ODONIS AND BURIDAN

Risto Saarinen

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN), Aristotle makes a distinction between intellectual and moral virtues. Intellectual virtues pertain to the perfection of the human mind. They are born and developed in us as a result of teaching. For this reason, they require time and experience (EN 1103a12-17). Aristotle mentions five intellectual virtues: prudence and art are related to practical life, but the three other intellectual virtues of science, understanding and wisdom deal with our reaching and holding the truth in theoretical matters (e.g. EN 1139b14-18).

The intellectual virtue of science (or scientific knowledge: *epistêmê*, *scientia*) is concerned with general and necessary things which can be employed in proofs and syllogistic reasoning. It is the soul's readiness to present syllogistic proofs in necessary matters (EN 1139b18-36). The starting-points and principles of this reasoning, however, must be understood intuitively and inductively. Therefore we need another intellectual virtue, that of understanding (or intuitive insight: *nous*, *intellectus*) in order to grasp the principles from which all reasoning starts. The virtue of understanding is a readiness to conceive these principles (EN 1140b30-1141a8).

Moreover, wisdom (*sophia*, *sapientia*) is the best mode of knowledge. Aristotle describes wisdom as that scientific knowledge which is concerned with the highest things. Wisdom is science and understanding which has the most valuable things as its object. Such wisdom is not concerned with some particular skill or expertise, but a wise person is so in the general and universal sense (EN 1141a8-1141b8). For Aristotle, wisdom does not seem to be qualitatively different from science and understanding, but it is a combination of the two with regard to the highest and most general things. Wisdom unifies the different expertises acquired through the activities of science and understanding.

In Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (M), wisdom has a prominent position as the virtue of those persons who know about first principles and causes. "Wisdom is knowledge about certain causes and principles" (M 982a1-2). The "wise man knows all things ... although he has not knowledge of each of them individually". "Superior science is more of the nature of wisdom than the ancillary" (M 982a8-10, 16-17). Since God is a first principle, metaphysics and wisdom are the most divine science (M 983 a1-10). Metaphysics and wisdom are thus related to the eternal, universal and immovable; Aristotle even calls metaphysics theology (M 1026a15-30).

In the following I will not focus on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* but on the medieval reception history of *Nicomachean Ethics*. I will survey some features of the scholastic interpretation of the three intellectual virtues of science, understanding and wisdom. In particular, I will deal with the nature of wisdom as compilation of science and understanding. First I will look at Thomas Aquinas's definition of the

three virtues in *Summa theologiae* and then compare it with two later commentaries on *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely those by Gerald Odonis and John Buridan.¹

Even though our sources are ethical writings, we cannot ignore *Metaphysics*. The scholastic authors were well aware of Aristotle's view of wisdom as metaphysics and theology. In addition, they continued other classical, hellenistic, biblical and Augustinian traditions of interpreting the many-sided phenomenon of wisdom.

Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas asks "whether there are just three habits of speculative intellect, namely wisdom, scientific knowledge and understanding".² One counter-argument claims that wisdom is not a distinct habit but a mode of knowledge, another holds that scientific knowledge and understanding are one, and a third one says that opinions can also be called intellectual virtues. We will concentrate on the identity of wisdom as it is outlined in Thomas's answer.

In an Aristotelian manner, Thomas begins his response by stating that the speculative intellect can reach the truth in two ways: in the case of principles, the intellect perceives their truth immediately (*percipitur statim*). This first way is called understanding. Other truths must be achieved in the second way by means of reasoning and investigation that proceeds from principles. This task of demonstrating the conclusions from principles is the activity of scientific knowledge or "science". Thomas makes a distinction in this activity: it may either concern the last truths in some knowable matter or the ultimate truths with respect to all human knowledge. The first group distinguishes science, whereas the second group identifies wisdom. In this second group, wisdom is concerned with the "highest causes" (*altissimas causas*) and with that which is "knowable first and chiefly in its nature". Thus wisdom can set all things in order with its perfect and universal judgment based on the first causes. In the framework of this distinction, one can have different habits of scientific knowledge, but only one wisdom. In spite of the distinction, Thomas can admit that wisdom is a kind of science (*quaedam scientia*).³

In *Sententia libri Ethicorum* Thomas holds, in keeping with Aristotle, that wisdom is both understanding and science. As an insight concerning the principles, it is understanding; as an ability which concludes from principles it is science. Because wisdom is a virtue that deals with all branches of scientific knowledge (*virtus omnium scientiarum*), it is more eminent than common knowledge. For this reason, wisdom is

¹ For the relationships among the three authors, see Walsh 1975 and Saarinen 2003.

² *Summa theologiae* I/II q57 a2.

³ *Summa theologiae* I/II q57 a2, resp., ad1. For the translation of scientia as science, see Stump 2003, 549.

distinct from common knowledge.⁴

Thomas's philosophical definition of the intellectual virtue of wisdom is not very elaborated. To a great extent, it simply follows Aristotle. In commenting upon the Aristotelian notion of wisdom Thomas does not make use of a wider theological view of wisdom. In *Summa theologiae*, this brief discussion on science and wisdom is nevertheless embedded into a broader theological context. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isa 11:2-3) include understanding, knowledge and wisdom. Aristotle's intellectual virtues thus have a theological counterpart. If science is considered as being a virtue, then we have learned and acquired it, but if it is considered as being a gift, we simply have received it without any virtuous elaboration on our part. In theology, gifts are normally considered to be higher and qualitatively better realities than virtues, since gifts have their origin in God as giver.⁵

The distinction between virtues and gifts is philosophically challenging, because it is not obvious in what sense intellectual capacities can be acquired as virtues. Repeated exercise and will-power are normally needed for the production of a virtue. How can we learn intuitive understanding or wisdom through such exercise? One is tempted to think that intellectual brightness is simply there as gift or talent. Without going deeper into this complicated matter, it should be kept in mind that, for Aquinas, human will plays a role even in the emergence of intellectual virtues. On the other hand, it is also clear that intellectual virtues are in many ways very different from actual moral virtues which are the main subject of ethics.⁶

Gerald Odonis

We have seen that the philosophical definition of wisdom in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas does not manage to distinguish this highest intellectual virtue very clearly from understanding and science. Later scholastics struggled with the same problem. The first Franciscan commentator of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Gerald Odonis, asks "whether wisdom is simultaneously science and understanding".⁷

Arguments against this opinion proceed from obvious conceptual problems. Two distinct virtues cannot be simultaneously called a third virtue. We may say that the first part of wisdom is understanding and the second part science, but, given this, they cannot be simultaneously one wisdom. We may also say that wisdom is for the most part understanding or for the most part science, or that there are many different kinds of wisdom, but not that one and only wisdom is both science and understanding at the same time.⁸

⁴ *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, lb6 lc5 n9.

⁵ Stump 2003, 350-51.

⁶ See Stump 2003, 339-350 and Reichberg 2002.

⁷ Odonis 1500, 129 vb (lib. VI q12): "Utrum simul sit [sapientia] scientia et intellectus".

⁸ Odonis 1500, 129vb-130ra.

In defending Aristotle's view, i.e. that wisdom nevertheless proceeds from the two other intellectual virtues, Odonis undertakes several qualifications. He first compares the "doctrine of wisdom" (*doctrina sapientialis*) with the doctrinal identity of logic and natural philosophy (*doctrina logicalis, naturalis*).⁹ Wisdom and logic are distinguished from other doctrines with regard to the generality of their subject matter. Because of this generality, wisdom and logic can question their own axiomatic principles, whereas other sciences cannot. Other sciences concentrate on making proofs which proceed from the enunciated axioms, but logic and wisdom both enunciate their principles and make proofs. The strategy of making proofs with regard to the principles consists in showing that the negation of the enunciated principles is false, as Aristotle remarks e.g. in *Metaphysics* IV, 4. In this sense wisdom, like the logic of refutations, employs both the mode of intuitive understanding and the mode of scientific proof.¹⁰

Wisdom and natural philosophy, or physics, are connected with one another and distinguished from other branches of doctrine in their treatment of causality. Other sciences make proofs on the basis of causality (*per causas*), but they do not treat causes as such (*de causis*). Wisdom and natural philosophy discuss causes as one subject matter of their doctrine. They employ causality in making proofs, but, in addition to this general procedure of science, they have a different relationship to the very phenomenon of causality. Other sciences "accept" causality as their point of departure, but wisdom and natural philosophy can also conclude that there is such a thing as causality. Thus their acceptance of causality as conclusion differs from its presupposition as principle.¹¹ In this remark we thus see how wisdom employs both understanding and science.

The connection of wisdom and logic concerns the order of knowledge, whereas the connection between wisdom and natural philosophy deals with the order of being. Therefore, the nature of wisdom as indivisible unity of understanding and science is twofold. It first has to do with the phenomenon of both enunciating and making proofs in matters that are most general. In this activity wisdom is comparable to logic. Second, it is related to the phenomenon of both understanding what causality is and employing causality in making proofs. In this activity wisdom can be

⁹ Odonis 1500, 130 va. "Doctrina sapientialis" is probably synonymous with metaphysics. "Doctrina naturalis" is sometimes referred to as "phisica".

¹⁰ Odonis 1500, 130ra: "Sciendum ergo quod doctrina logicalis et doctrina sapientialis conveniunt ad invicem et differunt ab aliis doctrinis in generalitate ut habetur 4. metaphisice. ... Ipse namque possunt arguere contra negantes principia, non tamen alie doctrine ut habet 1. phisicorum et 4. metaphisice. Ideo alie se habent ad sua principia enunciative et non probative ... Iste tamen due sua principia probant et enunciant. Et ideo intellectus harum doctrinarum inducit modum scientie per eo quod ad ipsum inducunt probationes." Cf. *Metaph.* 1106a12-13.

¹¹ Odonis 1500, 130 ra.

compared to natural philosophy.¹²

In addition, both logic and natural philosophy lack something that proper wisdom as unity of understanding and science possesses. Logic does not treat the aetiology of causes (*redditiva causarum*); physics does not treat the first causes as such. Logic thus lacks the treatment of causes and physics the treatment of first principles. For these reasons, we need a distinct habit of wisdom which is similar to these two other branches of knowledge but not identical with either of them.¹³

We see that Odonis's discussion of the identity of Aristotelian wisdom is more elaborated and systematic than Thomas's. At the same time, its basic elements remain similar to Aquinas. As in Thomas, wisdom is concerned with the highest causes and first principles. Through a longer comparison with logic and physics, however, Odonis organises the discussion of Thomas and Aristotle in a more systematic fashion. He formulates an opinion according to which the identity of wisdom consists of several partial identities which together yield a new identity. Some very general branches of knowledge, that is, logic and physics, are concerned with both understanding and science. Wisdom is similar to both logic and physics, but not identical with either of them. Therefore, we must establish a new branch of knowledge, *doctrina sapientialis*, or metaphysics.

John Buridan

In a brief paper, it is not possible to trace all different sources which later scholastics employ in their discussion of wisdom.¹⁴ I will only show how the discussion begun by Aristotle and Thomas acquires a more systematic elaboration in some 14th-century commentaries on *Nicomachean Ethics*. At the same time, it is important to see how the focus of the discussion remains relatively unchanged. After Thomas, the problems become more elaborated, but they nevertheless remain the same problems. John Buridan's influential *Quaestiones super decem libros Ethicorum* is a paradigmatic example of the dynamics of both innovative enrichment and remaining coherence.

John Buridan asks the same question as Odonis, namely "whether wisdom is

¹² Odonis 1500, 130 ra, tertio, quarto.

¹³ Odonis 1500, 130 ra: "Quinto sciendum est quod logica quamvis probet sua principia non immo dicitur intellectus et scientia eque proprie sicut sapientia que non est de causis ut redditiva causarum. Phisica vero quamvis sit de causis et sit redditiva causarum non tamen est de primis causis simpliciter nec redditiva primarum causarum simpliciter. Et immo quia doctrine logicali deficit causarum consideratio et doctrine naturali causarum primarum et versabilium principiorum consideratio. Immo nec ista nec illa dicuntur sapientia nec aliquis unus habitus qui proprie sit intellectus et scientia eo modo quo competit sapientie".

¹⁴ For a general description of Odonis's and Buridan's view of virtue and ethics, see Kent 1995 and Zupko 2003, esp. 227-242.

understanding and science".¹⁵ Arguments against this claim are similar to those in Odonis's commentary. Buridan, however, does not give one definite answer to the question but concludes that one can distinguish wisdom from understanding and science in many ways.¹⁶ He outlines no less than three different ways to respond. In doing this, he repeatedly employs expressions like "some people say that". We may assume that all three ways were debated in Buridan's times and are in that sense his sources.

According to the first way, we may claim that in scientific demonstrations we need, in addition to understanding and science, a third notion. This third notion enables us to connect principles and conclusions in a proper way. We may prove that some conclusion is true, but in order to see that it is true because of the truth of the principles, we need wisdom.¹⁷

The third notion is thus an additional quality of scientific knowledge which enables us to grasp the causal relationship. In addition to (1) the principles achieved through understanding and (2) the conclusions derived by virtue of science, systematic knowledge needs (3) an adequate grasp of underlying, systematic causalities. This grasp is called wisdom. Buridan employs the following example: It is one thing to know that the earth is situated between the sun and the moon; another thing to know that the moon is eclipsed; and a third thing to know how this eclipse is caused by the earth's position between sun and moon. This third notion is required for scientific knowledge in *Posterior Analytics* I,2 when Aristotle says that knowing a thing means that we know its proper causes.¹⁸

One may remark against the first way that, if this were generally the case, we would need wisdom in all scientific demonstrations. But Aristotle says both in *Ethics* (VI,7) and in *Metaphysics* (1,1) that wisdom pertains to the things that are highest by nature. To this objection Buridan replies that, according to Aristotle, we may speak about wisdom in particular fields of expertise. This is qualified and particular wisdom, whereas in metaphysics we deal with wisdom as such, as a proper intellectual virtue.¹⁹ Buridan grants, however, that at least in physics and logic we may speak of distinct wisdom. Even then we can say that in metaphysics wisdom is more *simpliciter* because of its highest subject matter. This resembles the way we call

¹⁵ Buridan 1968, lib. VI, q 12, 127vb: "Utrum sapientia sit intellectus et scientia".

¹⁶ Buridan 1968, 127 vb-128 ra, e.g. "Multi sunt modi distinguendi sapientiam ab intellectu et scientia." These "modi" are also called "modi dicendi" or "ways" (via).

¹⁷ Buridan 1968, 128 ra.

¹⁸ Buridan 1968, 128 ra: "Et hec tertia notitia pertinet ad sapientiam. Licet enim he tres noticie concurrant in eadem demonstrationem, tamen formaliter distinguuntur. Aliud enim est cognoscere quod terra interposita est inter solem et lunam, et aliud quod luna eclipsatur, et aliud quod ipsa eclipsatur propter dictam terre interpositionem. Et illa tertia noticia notavit Aristoteles in diffinitione ipsius scire primo posteriorum quando dicit et quam illius est causa." Cf. *Anal. post.* 71b10-12.

¹⁹ Buridan 1968, 128 ra-rb.

Paul an Apostle *simpliciter*, that is, without claiming that there would be no other apostles.²⁰

The first way teaches that wisdom is not formally understanding and science, but rather "materially". In addition to these two notions, we need a third notion which provides our intellect with a sufficient idea of causality, thus organising scientifically the principles obtained through understanding and the conclusions derived through inference.²¹

Buridan here applies Aristotle's definition of scientific knowledge in *Posterior Analytics* 1,2. It is not enough to find accidental correlations between, for instance, the earth's particular positions and the eclipses of the moon. A scientist needs additional wisdom in order to grasp the underlying systematic causality between his points of departure on the one hand and his rational inferences on the other. With the "third notion" of wisdom the scientist can realize how the earth's shadow causes the moon to be eclipsed. Knowing a thing means that we know its cause or explanation. This capacity is ascribed to wisdom in Buridan's first way.

Buridan's second way defines wisdom as an acquired habit of the intellect. This habit is discussed in Aristotle's philosophical metaphysics.²² Metaphysics deals with the most general doctrines, that is, first principles, God and intelligences. Unlike other sciences, metaphysics and logic can question their own principles. One should not think that the phenomenon of questioning the principles aims at false sophistry. On the contrary, logic and wisdom can employ an "elenctic" inference, that is, a method by which one can falsify the contradictory opposite of a true principle and, consequently, affirm the true principle. As Aristotle shows in *Sophistici elenchi*, this mode of inference is not sophistry, but a method of discovering and eliminating false principles.²³

Like wisdom, metaphysics is characterized by a twofold attitude to the principles. On the one hand, wisdom acts like understanding, that is, it does not seek proofs but has an immediate inclination to the truth as such. On the other hand, wisdom acts like science in employing the elenctic method through which it can identify the true principles.²⁴ We see that the second way resembles Odonis's discussion insofar as

²⁰ Buridan 1968, 128 rb.

²¹ Buridan 1968, 128 rb: "Diceretur igitur quod sapientia non est formaliter intellectus et scientia, sed quasi materialiter et suppositive quia non secundum noticiam principii nec secundum noticiam conclusionis dicitur sapientia formaliter sed secundum noticiam terciam qua cognosco non solum hoc esse et illud sed hoc esse propter aliud".

²² Buridan 1968, 128 rb: "Alio modo potest dici quod sola methaphysica dicitur sapientia si loquamur solum de habitibus intellectualibus nobis humanitus acquisitis prout de eis loquitur Aristoteles".

²³ Buridan 1968, 128 rb. Cf. *Metaph.* 1106a12-13 and *Sophistici elenchi* 165a1-5.

²⁴ Buridan 1968, 128 rb: "Ex quibus apparet quod methaphysica dupliciter habet ad huiusmodi principia. Uno modo per modum intellectus in quantum concedit ea sine

the comparison with elenctic logic is made, but Buridan here enriches Odonis's logical remarks.

The third way of defining wisdom proceeds from the observation that Aristotle does not restrict his discussion to the principles of various disciplines, but wants to include the first principle of being, God, as well.²⁵ Wisdom, therefore, deals with the most difficult and admirable of divine things. Many have said that we can only ascend to the higher and separate substances through the knowledge received by our senses. On the other hand, since the separate substances are very different from our perceptions, we need something else in addition to them. This something is provided by the "natural light" of *intellectus*, which is capable of providing us with a better "notion" of separate substances than sense-perception alone.²⁶

In this way Aristotle's metaphysics, or wisdom, is characterized by a twofold approach towards separate substances, or God. Science, on the one hand, relies on the evidence of sense-perception and makes its inferences on the basis of such evidence. Understanding, on the other hand, employs a non-perceptive light which endows it with a possibility to grasp the nature of these substances. In this sense, too, wisdom appears as both understanding and science when it is related to the first principle of being.²⁷

Buridan finally remarks that the three ways do not exclude each other. In his brief responses to the counter-arguments he concludes again that wisdom is not formally understanding or science, but only materially.²⁸ Following the third way, one may say that wisdom is a habit relating to those principles which are neither immediately at our disposal (understanding) nor indirectly knowable through mediating inferences (science). The habit of wisdom employs both the mode of immediate intuition, or understanding, and the mode of scientific knowledge through inference in order to grasp these principles. In this sense wisdom is both understanding and science.²⁹

probatione ex sola naturali inclinatione intellectus ad ipsum verum. Aliomodo per modum scientie in quantum habet viam ad arguendum de ipsis elenchice contra negantes ea. Ideo sapientia simul dicitur intellectus et scientia".

²⁵ Buridan 1968, 128 rb-va: "Nam Aristoteles non solum vult quod sapientia sit intellectus et scientia circa prima doctrine principia, sed etiam circa prima principia essendi que sunt deus et intelligentie". Cf. *Metaph.* 983a1-10.

²⁶ Buridan 1968, 128 va.

²⁷ Buridan 1968, 128 va: "Dicunt igitur isti quod methaphysica que secundum Aristotelis vocatur sapientia in quantum versatur circa substantias separatas habet se ad huiusmodi substantias primo per modum scientie in quantum non potest nisi per sensibilia venire in noticiam illarum. Secundo per modum intellectus in quantum ultra sensibilibus exigentiam virtutem proprii luminis sapit naturas earum".

²⁸ Buridan 1968, 128 va.

²⁹ Buridan 1968, 128 va: "Vel dicendum est secundum terciam viam modo consimili scilicet quod sapientia non est formaliter intellectus neque scientia, sed est habitus circa talia que nec ex se tamen notificabilia sunt nobis, nec tamen virtute mediorum

Concluding Remarks

The various interconnections among Aristotle's theory of science, ethics and metaphysics are essential for Buridan. His discussion of wisdom in *Quaestiones super decem libros Ethicorum*, Book VI, q12, is concerned with the understanding of wisdom as a virtue which is essential for both scientific knowledge and metaphysics. The former concern is prominent in his discussion of the "first way", the latter in his description of the "second" and "third" way. In spite of this integrative effort, Buridan's formal question remains the same as Odonis's, namely: how can we say that wisdom is both understanding and science? This question does not stem from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* nor from *Posterior Analytics*; but from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

It is evident that Odonis employs Aquinas and that Buridan employs both Aquinas and Odonis. On the other hand, all three authors are remarkably independent from their predecessors. We must keep in mind that Buridan explicitly says that he is exposing various opinions of his colleagues. But even so, we can see how a creative enrichment and systematization takes place during the elaboration of this one issue. For these reasons, one cannot just conclude that a later author is "dependant" on some earlier author. The nature of dependance must be more carefully studied before anything more can be said concerning the actual doctrinal position of a given author.

Given that wisdom is an extremely rich philosophical and theological topic which has occupied Western thinkers belonging to various traditions, it is remarkable that Aquinas, Odonis and Buridan can all focus on Aristotle's specific view of wisdom as intellectual virtue. They do not bring in, for instance, the discussion about spiritual gifts and talents, but concentrate on the identity of this intellectual virtue in its relationship to understanding and science. Certainly, Aquinas speaks of theological wisdom elsewhere in his *Summa theologiae*, as we already remarked. Odonis mentions theological materials in his previous question.³⁰ Even Buridan has some theological leanings in his postulate of natural light in the "third way".

In spite of these theological indications, wisdom is, in the texts analysed above, considered as a philosophical topic. The integration of this topic into the general Aristotelian framework gets the primary attention of all three scholastics. In this integrative work theology does not disappear completely, but it keeps a low profile. Maybe this phenomenon is essential for genuine philosophical work. One need not abandon theology completely, but one should, while working as philosopher, mention

per que oportet nos duci in noticiam ipsorum, sed secundum utrumque modum simul propter quod simul participat modum seu virtutem intellectus et scientie".

³⁰ Odonis 1500, 129 va-vb (VI q 13): "Utrum sapientia sit intellectualis virtus." This question contains a list of theological sentences, e.g. "per sapientiam homo fiat contemptor mundi" and "per sapientia sapiens fiat amicus dei" (both 129 vb).

theological topics only in passing.

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