The formation of personal judgment in practical affairs: An epistemological view

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ABSTRACT
In our present cultural situation, we observe a growing expansion of information together with a proliferation of opinions and interpretations. This situation has been intensified by the health emergency caused by the Covid-19 virus. Our study aims to provide the keys for the formation of personal judgment in the practical field, so that it can indirectly serve as guidance for the management of information related to the pandemic. We will attempt to illustrate, first, the specificity of practical knowledge, describing its sources and conditions, as well as the scope of practical truth, which such judgment allows us to reach. Secondly, we will point out the factors that positively and negatively influence personal judgment. On the one hand, we will indicate some external elements that hinder or prevent access to information, such as misinformation, disinformation and fake news. On the other hand, we will focus on the internal dispositions of practical judgment, particularly the intellectual and moral virtues. In this context, we will deal in greater detail with prudence as a dianoetic virtue. We will conclude by pointing out the importance of the virtues in achieving critical thinking, and the importance of critical thinking in building stable access to information.

1. Introduction
It has been reported that Hiram W. Johnson, senator for California, made the following statement to the US Senate in 1917: ‘The first casualty when war comes is truth’. The dramatic frame was that of World War I. Our context today, with the explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic, is different, but we are not in a less dramatic environment, and the loss of truth is still a devastating possibility.

In a period of turmoil, it seems acknowledged that life is often substituted with surviving, and basic human values substituted with blind interests. Therefore, in times when the basis of humankind and humanity in every single person are at stake, the first line of defense should be knowledge and lucidity. The issue is how to be lucid enough
not only to see reality, but also to see the obstacles that prevent us from seeing it. When this becomes difficult, it may happen that the truth is renounced or substitutes for it are accepted.

2. In search of the truth

The problem of skepticism is as old as thought, and has manifested itself in many forms throughout history. It can be said to be a bush that has grown intertwined with the tree of human knowledge. The reasons for its existence are varied, but can ultimately be reduced to the experience of error and deception.

If we keep in mind that the sources of our knowledge are not only those that come from our individual sensory evidence, but also those that derive from our relations with others, we can recognize trust as an essential factor in the search for truth.

It is impossible for us to have direct experience of everything that is useful to us in life or that can potentially enrich us. It seems that the Italian writer Emilio Salgari wrote many novels about the seas of Malaysia and the West Indies in the late 1800s without ever having left northern Italy. Of course, nothing of what he wrote would have been accepted as even minimally plausible if it were not for trust, both on the part of the writer and on that of his readers.

The most direct consequence of skepticism is relativism, theoretical and practical. If there is no truth, there is nothing beyond one’s own point of view and strictly individual profit. Only if there is truth can one think of something common and, therefore, there can be a dialogue. That is why truth is considered an essential part of the common good in society. Relativism, on the other hand, is the best breeding ground for fanaticism, because from denying the truth one goes on to impose one’s own interests.

The interests of one party may seem altruistic or even the best for all parties, but when truth is sacrificed and loses its priority, coexistence is perverted, because there is no common ground to dwell on. The real threat to the essence of man, Heidegger said, lies in depriving language of its reason as the house of being, destroying the dwelling place where man dwells in the truth of being (1977, 199).

The priority of truth means that the first approach to reality should be that of respect. Only if we respect the truth of things, things as they are, we can respect each other. In a dialogue between the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo and the French philosopher René Girard, the former argued that the slogan amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas [‘Plato a friend, but truth a greater one’] should be turned upside down: amica veritas sed magis amicus Plato [‘truth a friend, but Plato a greater one’]. The reason for that, he argued, was that the priority of truth has been always adduced to justify the burning of heretics or books. To this Girard responded: ‘I don’t see the proposition amica veritas sed magis amicus Plato as differing very much from its converse. For me they are the same thing’ (Vattimo and Girard 2010). Denying opposition between truth and friendship, Girard indirectly denied Vattimo’s relativism: in fact, friendship is made possible by truth, since truth allows us to recognize the dignity of others as friends.

Truth is the common ground of respect and freedom. For this reason, Goethe had stated that ‘All laws and rules of conduct may ultimately be reduced to a single one: to truth’ (Goethe and Müller 1870, 27). How to overcome, then, the limits of individual
experience without falling into credulity? How to prevent a sterilizing skepticism in the face of the experience of deception or the labyrinth of misinformation? It is necessary not only to recover the value of knowledge, but also to defend and strengthen it.

3. Practical judgment

Aristotle stated that ‘all men by nature desire to know’ (Metaphysics I, 1, 980 a 1), and went further by arguing that ‘the human race lives also by art and reasonings’ (Metaphysics I, 1, 980 a 27–28). The human being desires to know, and he desires it not only as an objective among others, but as that in which he affirms his humanity, for our nature is radically open to being through knowledge and love. St. Augustine of Hippo wondered: ‘Of what shall man be greedy, for what purpose shall he keep his inner palate healthy, his taste exercised, if not to eat and drink wisdom, justice, truth, eternity?’ (Tractates on the Gospel of John 26, 5). Knowledge is the most basic and necessary food. How to keep our inner palate healthy?

We said before that in moments of crisis the first line of defense should be knowledge and lucidity. However, lucidity means first and foremost openness to reality. The classical notion of contemplation is precisely this, ‘a purely receptive gaze on reality’ (Pieper 1998, 77). This is the starting point of knowledge: to be faithful to the being before us. For this reason, Aristotle said that the highest knowledge is contemplative, that is, receptive of being without seeking to modify it (Ethica Nicomachea, X, 8, 1178b 20–24).

Human knowledge, though, is not only theoretical, but also practical and productive. Science tells us how things are, but often we are interested in how to behave or in what to do with science. Even scientific knowledge or mere historic report has a practical component: is an issue worth investigating? What are the consequences of obtaining certain data? Is it relevant into whose hands a certain piece of information falls? The development of science in times of war or during a health crisis—such as the present one—shows us that knowledge cannot be separated from precise practical motivations. Not every consideration of practical affairs is tantamount to selfish interest or unscrupulous pragmatism, but good and evil are always intertwined with our desire to know things (Stanley 2005, 88–89). Although knowledge by itself does not make us good, we cannot be good without knowledge.

Aristotle pointed out that human knowledge is not homogeneous in relation to different objects. In the realm of human actions, our knowledge is of a practical kind and follows specific guidelines, different from a purely theoretical approach. Hence, says the Philosopher, ‘precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions’ (Aristotle, Ethica Nic., I, 3, 1094b 13). What this means is that, in practical matters, we must accept probability and plausibility rather than seek exact demonstrations. Practical knowledge, however, is not vague or imprecise, but transcends a purely descriptive approach to reality to become applicable, i.e. to direct actions to particular ends.

Practical knowledge has an enormous relevance in the technical-artistic domain, but above all in the moral sphere (Aristotle, Ethica Nic., VI, 4, 1140 a 1–10). It should be noted, however, that practical reason is not a power distinct from the theoretical one,
but another kind of intellectual activity (Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, 10, 433 a 14–18), according to different habits.

On the one hand, theoretical reason elaborates its contents in fields such as mathematics, physics and biology and systematizes them as ‘science’ (*episteme*). On the other, practical reason can also be applied to things through habits. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Aristotle distinguished between two types of activity: action (*praxis*) and production (*poiesis*). Accordingly, practical reason can be applied to action through the habit of prudence (*phronesis*), while it can be applied to production through the habit of art (*techne*) (Aristotle, *Ethica Nic.*, VI, 4–5, 1140 a 1 – 1140 b 29).

It is worth mentioning, however, that the object of practical reason is reality itself, about which theoretical reason reflects. This reality is called practical insofar as it is known by reason in order to carry out an activity. Consequently, there is no real distinction between knowledge of a practical reality and practical knowledge of a reality.

Of course, there is room for a theoretical knowledge of action, such as occurs in the philosophy of action, in historical science or in an informative chronicle. What is proper to practical knowledge is not only that it describes action, as if it were a theoretical reality, that is, as an object of speculation. What is proper to this knowledge is that it recognizes the action in its tending towards its end, directing it to that end. Nor is it enough for practical knowledge that the subject has a merely subjective practical purpose (that he wants to do something practical with the knowledge he attains), but the practical character is found in the object proper to this knowledge: the action, the results of this action or the means to attain it.

### 4. The problem of practical truth

Practical judgment allows the human being to access a dimension of knowledge that receives the name of ‘practical truth’. Although this truth is not essentially different from the theoretical one—the reality to which the subject opens himself is the same—nevertheless the mode of this opening to reality is different. Our intellect, insofar as it adapts itself to the being of things, discovers theoretical truth; whereas, insofar as it recognizes the correspondence of things to it, attains practical truth. What, therefore, is practical truth?

According to Aristotle, practical truth lies in the conformity that reason recognizes between action and right desire:

> What affirmation and negation are in thinking, pursuit and avoidance are in desire [...]. Now this kind of intellect and of truth is practical; [...] of the part which is practical and intellectual the good state is truth in agreement with right desire. (*Ethica Nic.*, VI, 2, 1138 a 20.25–30)

Such truth, therefore, does not consist only in a matter of knowledge, but also results from the rightness of the appetite and the dispositions that allow that rightness. Aristotle therefore affirms that:

> Since the good man judges each class of things rightly, and in each the truth appears to him. [...] the good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things, being as it were the norm and measure of them. (*Ethica Nic.*, III, 4, 1113 a 28–32)
It is not easy therefore to give an indisputable and ultimate definition of practical truth, and the difficulty lies in determining what is the subject of such a truth, that is, what we say to be true (or false) in a practical sense. Even if it is not possible to collect here all the different positions of scholars, they can be summarized, at least, in two positions:

a. The subject of practical truth is the judgment by which we recognize the correspondence of action with practical reason.
b. The subject of practical truth is action insofar as it conforms to the right desire.

According to the first position, practical truth is a feature of something in our reason, namely, its judgment about action. For the second, practical truth is a feature of the action, that is, its conformity with right desire. Stephen Brock (2017) proposes the first option, while the second has such strong advocates as Elisabeth Anscombe (1981).

We consider the first one to be more adequate, and this for two reasons. On the one hand, the first position it does not entirely separate theoretical truth and practical truth, as instead happens with the second position. In fact, the theoretical and practical intellect are not diverse powers. On the other hand, the first position does not resolve practical truth in the rightness of desire, as, again, happens with the second position. The first position therefore keeps the truth in the order of knowledge, which is more consistent with the common meaning of truth.

What we think can be said in a synthetic way is that practical truth consists in the recognition of all those aspects of reality that allow us to act upon it. Therefore, it should be pointed out that what is true—both in the theoretical and in the practical realm—are not things, but the correspondence of our knowledge with them, whatever the modality of that knowledge may be. The cognitive activity in which truth is properly attained is judgment, whether theoretical or practical. But, at the same time, the cause (or measure) of that truth is not our reason, but things themselves as they are known by our reason.

Therefore, the way in which our knowledge arrives at practical truth is through practical judgment. Practical truth indeed is not an inferior truth to theoretical truth, it is simply of a different kind within the sphere of reason: that which is proper to certain areas, such as moral action or political activity.

Practical judgment does not totally determine the will to choose a concrete end, but neither does the will totally determine practical judgment. As Thomas Aquinas says:

The will in some sense moves reason by commanding its act; and reason moves the will by proposing to it its object, which is the end. Thus it is that either power can in some way be informed by the other. (Aquinas, The Disputed Questions on Truth, q. 24, a. 6 ad 5)

In this circularity between knowledge and will, practical judgment reaches truth through good choices, and these become true through practical judgment. As Fernando Inciarte states:

To decide theoretically about the good presupposes having to decide practically for the good, to have to profess it, to have to pronounce oneself for it, to commit oneself to it, to give oneself to it, to put oneself or to remove oneself as the only pledge that guarantees its possession. The good can only be known by one’s own experience. (2001, 108)
5. Authoritative opinions as sources of practical judgment

Since practical judgment refers to practical reality—the action, the result of the action, the instruments to carry it out—its object is something contingent and variable. In this way, practical matters do not allow us to reach absolute certainty, which could only be attained in the face of universal principles.

Thomas Aquinas affirms that:

The practical reason [...] is busied with contingent matters, about which human actions are concerned: and consequently, although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects. [...] In matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles: and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all. (Summa Theologiae, I-II, q. 94, a. 4, Aquinas 1992)

Aristotle stated that practical reason proceeds by dialectical reasoning, that is, starting from plausible opinions (endoxa) and seeking probable conclusions. This is the kind of reasoning characteristic in ethical questions or in political matters. In these areas, the Stagirite says, it is convenient to start from plausible premises, and not try to do so from self-evident propositions. Plausible opinions, however, are not simple opinions (doxai), but the ones that have an especial ‘authority’ for a good reason. Accordingly, they are not simply the majority opinion, but the ones that are most likely true, or true in most cases, and they are a good enough basis to carry out an action. Hence, they require a kind of purification, that is to say, a comparison with other opinions and a certain correction of inaccuracies until the strongest possible statements are reached.

What are, then, plausible opinions (endoxa) and how can they be a starting point of a reasoning that claims to be true? As Aristotle says, they are ‘accepted by everyone or by the majority or by the wise—i.e. by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and reputable of them’ (Topica, I, I, 100 b 21–23). Although we speak here of plausible opinions, it is not a question of an objective probability or a statistical frequency, nor of a certainty limited to a reduced number of subjects. It is rather a certain degree of truth, i.e. that which can be attained from certain data at a certain time.

On the other hand, endoxa are relevant as means to reach truth, not as axioms or postulates. Indeed, such authoritative opinions come from experience and are contingent truths, that is, they are true not by necessity. Instead, axioms are propositions that show their necessity, so that their opposite is not admissible; while postulates don’t show a necessity, but are accepted for a reason of convenience, and so require a particular consensus. This is important, insofar as authoritative opinions or endoxa presuppose shared experience and the conclusions from them are not simply the consequence of a particular consensus (Hoffe 2003, 35–36). A particular consensus is the result of a shared decision (a contract, for example); but that of which there is a universal consensus is not the result of an agreement, but of shared knowledge.

Endoxa can therefore be connected to what some thinkers have called ‘common sense’ (Reid 1997). Broadly speaking, a good way to understand them in our contemporary culture is that of ‘shared certainties’ (different, as we mentioned, from truths of consensus). Indeed, Aristotle affirms that this kind of opinion is ‘that which everyone
thinks really is so; and the man who attacks this belief will hardly have anything more credible to maintain instead’ (Ethica Nic., X, 2, 1173 a 1–2). Therefore, endoxa are not the result of consensus, but a ‘shared knowledge’, so that they can be considered as the common ground of a culture. They are very likely an integral part of what Husserl called Lebenswelt, ‘the world of life’ (Husserl 1970, 108–109).

6. Trust as a framework of practical judgment

As long as endoxa are shared knowledge, they also require a certain inclination (euphyia) to accept them, without which they will lose effectiveness (Aristotle, Topica, VIII 14, 163b 12–16). We may find a correspondence to this concept in our present understanding of ‘trust’. Social trust seems indeed to be both a source and a condition of practical knowledge.

Far from being a mere psychological disposition, close to credulity, trust can be described as ‘the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community’ (Fukuyama 1996, 26).

Trust is therefore an essential part of the common good, that is, a fundamental condition for human coexistence, without which it is not possible to build a society. Stefano Zamagni has rightly pointed out that ‘widespread trust is the true factor of a country’s economic development and moral progress’ (2008, 155).

But trust is more than a condition for community life: it is also a source of practical judgment, insofar as it widens the limits of individual experience to take on the experience of others, in the form of a tradition and a culture.

In antiquity, it was possible for an individual to embrace a good deal of human knowledge. If human beings are open to the whole of reality, it seems natural that they should want to know everything. This desire is behind the famous adage sapere aude! popularized in the Age of Enlightenment, and the spirit of the Encyclopedia. However, this is not possible anymore: science has become increasingly specialized and has advanced along very different lines, so that human knowledge has become unmanageable for a single individual. To a large extent, the demand for teamwork and interdisciplinary approach to research, is motivated nowadays by the evidence of the limits of a one-sided observation.

However, reliance on knowledge transmitted by others goes beyond this, and I would like to point to two reasons. The first is that there are spheres of reality that are only socially accessible, and these are probably crucial areas for human life. Some of these are knowledge of moral values, elementary social conventions and some basic information about the physical world. The second reason is that, beyond the simple immediate personal relationships, scientific knowledge itself needs a community committed to the truth in order to embrace and transmit it. In this sense, Michael Polanyi conceived of the scientific community as a ‘republic’ or ‘society of explorers’ in search for truth (1964, 7–19).

7. Public institutions as enhancing or inhibiting trust

To a large extent, the distrust of truth, which is at the basis of skepticism, is a distrust of others as bearers of truth and of human beings in general as capable of knowing it.
It has been rightly pointed out that one of the ways in which faith can help reason is to restore its trust in the truth (John Paul II 1998, 6). But it is also true that mutual trust among human beings is an essential element of our access to reality. A basic example is intra-familial relations, above all maternal-filial relations. Hence, in dysfunctional families or uprooted societies, harmonious personal development and constructive interpersonal relationships are very poor—almost not feasible. Instead, trusting relationships make it possible to know the reality and make the right decisions. Let us think, for example, of doctor-patient relations, the teacher and the student or, in general, between the customer and the service provider: trust is at the basis of every form of contract and of human cooperation.

In the face of the growing complexity of social relations, it might seem that, in principle, it would be sufficient to legislate in an increasingly methodical way, multiplying the rules. Reality says that this is ultimately ineffective, since it is not possible to legislate all the complexity of human relations. Laws must protect social relations in the context of the common good, but they will never be sufficient if social trust is lacking. Hence, as Niklas Luhmann states (1982, 24–32), trust is an indispensable instrument for reducing complexity. In this sense, trust appears as an adequate instrument for creating the conditions for practical judgment. However, it seems to be a necessary condition, but not sufficient—or, at least, not at the simple individual level—to create the appropriate framework for personal judgments and actions.

As Zamagni has pointed out, for trust to be a real factor in the development of society as a whole, it is necessary to move from simply individual or group trust to ‘generalized trust’ (2008, 155). The creation of generalized trust leads to an increase in what recent sociology has called ‘social capital’, as Robert Putnam has pointed out (2000, 19): ‘Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’.

According to Francis Fukuyama, social capital is based precisely on trust: ‘social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or in certain parts of it’ (1996, 26). For this reason, he continues, it develops not only among individuals or small communities, but also in progressively broader spheres, reaching public institutions, such as labor groups, companies or political organizations.

When trust reaches public institutions and political community, it consolidates and generates the proper context for an authentically human life (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, no. 168). Indeed, public institutions are human organizations with a common interest function, involving structured and stable relationships between people. Since these institutions give permanence to practices and customs among individuals, it can be said that they help human relationships to be stable and, as insofar as they are oriented to the common good, they are grounded in truth. This common ground constitutes the favorable framework that allows practical judgment, decision-making and personal flourishing. On the other hand, distrust of public institutions not only weakens them, but ultimately harms the common good and impedes the development of individuals (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, no. 411). This would undermine the certainty necessary to make practical judgments appropriate to reality and to make the most effective decisions in each case.
Perhaps one of the worst consequences of the corruption of institutions is the disaffection generated in individuals towards the public sphere, inducing them progressively towards particular interests and thus deteriorating the social and relational fabric (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, no. 411).

If these last reflections are intended to underline the importance of institutional trust in relation to practical judgment, it is also important to emphasize what should not be confused with trust. There are at least two elements that can easily be interchanged with trust and yet are quite different and even harmful to it: credulity or blind faith in institutions, on the one hand, and the renunciation to personal action, evading the corresponding responsibilities, on the other hand.

Indeed, trust—at any level, individual or social—cannot be reduced to credulity, since, in principle, it must be based not only on the personal relation with the source of information, but also on the intrinsic rationality of the content to which assent is given. Trust is not equivalent to faith, although the latter is in continuity with the former.

On the other hand, trust cannot imply the renunciation of one’s own personal judgment and, therefore, of one’s own responsibility in making decisions. It has been unfairly attributed to the chancellor of the University of Cervera—in Catalonia—that he used the servile phrase towards the Spanish monarch Ferdinand VII: ‘Far be it from us, Your Majesty, the disastrous mania of thinking’. This is how it has subsequently been used, in a mocking manner, to refer to any renunciation of one’s own thinking in favor of the dictates of public power. In reality, the phrase pronounced by the said chancellor, the Barcelona clergyman Ramón Dou, was not that, but the following: ‘Far from us the dangerous novelty of digressing’. In the context in which that phrase was written, its author intended to reject charlatanism and the indiscriminate search for novelties (Fatás 2016). Therefore, it is more than likely that its meaning was exactly the opposite of the one attributed to it by the urban legend, that is, it was instead intended to warn against the mainstream, which confuses slogans with truths.

8. Practical judgment as a personal act

This last observation leads us to an assertion of capital importance: thinking is a personal act. Thomas Aquinas, in the context of the refutation of a single intellect for all human beings, affirmed: *hic homo intelligit*, ‘it is this concrete human individual who thinks’ (Summa I, q. 76, a. 1). It is not only a question of claiming the right to one’s own thought, not subjected to institutional dictates. The fact is rather that a thought that is not elaborated by the individual is not a true thought, it is not properly an action of thinking. It may be an informative or propaganda action—acceptable, depending on the case—but not a genuine act of thinking, precisely because there will be no judgment on the part of the subject.

What is it that makes a judgment—in the theoretical or practical sphere—a true act of thinking that can be the basis for a free decision? To answer this question, it is useful to recall the Greek verb corresponding to the action of judging: *krinein*. From this verb comes the noun *krisis* (act of judgment), the adjective *kritikon* (proper to judgment) and another derived noun, *kriterion* (element of judgment). The semantics of these
terms are quite broad, but suffice it to point out what seems to be essential in the act of judging: that is, to think critically, separating the good from the bad.

As an act of thought, judgment is a personal act. But it is also personal for another reason. Insofar as it is a practical judgment, it is ordered to action. Free action is immediately grounded in such a judgment, even if it is remotely grounded in theoretical knowledge. Aristotle affirmed: ‘actions and productions are all concerned with the individual’ (Metaphysics I, 1, 981 a 16–17). Therefore, the application of knowledge to action, characteristic of practical judgment, is a strictly personal act. One can exercise an action on the advice or command of another, but one cannot make a practical judgment on the part of another.

Michael Polanyi has extensively elaborated the relevance of scientific knowledge as a personal act of the researcher (1974), but this characteristic stands out in the case of practical judgment, as action-oriented knowledge. As Karol Wojtyla has pointed out, ‘although being is prior to action, and thus the person and his value is prior to and more fundamental than the value of the action, it is in actions that the person manifests himself’ (Wojtyla 1979, 265). Therefore, practical judgment appears as a personal act of special relevance, even if it is not yet an action or a production.

9. Factors influencing practical judgment

Insofar as practical judgment refers to action, it requires the agreement between action and right reason in order to be true. At the same time, for reason to be right, certain dispositions are required, since—as Aristotle pointed out—‘according to the nature of each one, so seems to him the end’ (Ethica Nic., III, 5, 1114 b 1–2). Therefore, it seems clear that, in practical judgment, dispositions play a very important role. In fact, Aristotle affirmed that ‘wickedness perverts us and causes us to be deceived about the starting-points of action. Therefore, it is evident that it is impossible to be practically wise without being good’ (Ethica Nic., VI, 12, 1144 a 34–36).

The dispositions of which we speak here refer both to the knowledge of reality and to the will to perform actions; and, when they are stably conserved, they constitute what Aristotle called ‘virtues’. For him, indeed, the virtuous individual is self-governing (enkrates) and so he can make free decisions. Instead, the non-virtuous individual has no self-government (is akrates): he possesses a vague and generic knowledge of the ends of his action, but his affectivity is not clearly and firmly oriented to it, and so he has a confused practical judgment. The non-virtuous knows, in general, that he must make a good decision, but he does not know how to make it concretely. In contrast, the virtuous individual is effectively self-governing and, consequently, his practical judgment adequately recognizes his ends, thus allowing for a free choice (Aristotle, Ethica Nic., VII, 3 1146 b 8 — 1147 b 18).

It seems clear that, in order for practical judgment to be true and therefore feasible for a right decision, adequate dispositions are necessary, for both internal and external elements, which are closely related.

Among the internal elements, affective states and previously acquired habits are worth mentioning. In the first place, practical judgment requires a particular order of the subject’s own affectivity, an order that is certainly compromised in the case
of emotional states of particular intensity. Emotions, in fact, filter in some way the information we receive and evaluative judgments about it, but in general it is possible to recognize this condition of our experience and maintain the rectitude of practical judgments. This is not so in the case of ‘altered emotional states’, of both positive and negative charge, in relation to perceived values. This is the situation that Aristotle calls \textit{akrasia}, lack of self-government. With it, one is prevented from making proper practical judgments and correct decisions.

On the other hand, previously acquired habits also influence practical judgments. If they are vicious habits, they reduce the individual’s mastery of action, favoring the subject to be moved by external stimuli beyond his control. In the case of virtuous habits, instead, these dispositions favor the subject’s mastery over his own actions, so that he achieves what Aristotle called \textit{enkrateia} (\textit{Ethica Nic.}, VII, 10 1152 a 28–33).

Virtuous habits enable the subject, therefore, to make a practical judgment adequate to reality. Such habits are not only moral, but also intellectual. In the first case, they help to moderate our desires and Aristotle called them ‘moral virtues’; on the other hand, the latter allow us to order our knowledge, and the Philosopher gave them the name of ‘intellectual virtues’ (\textit{Ethica Nic.}, I, 13, 1103 a 3–10).

Along with the internal dispositions, mentioned by Aristotle when speaking of practical judgment and decision-making, we must mention some external elements, which have acquired notable importance in our present situation. As we have already pointed out, they are closely related to the internal dispositions, in that they can modify them, helping or hindering practical judgments.

\section*{10. Misinformation, disinformation, fake news}

We have previously spoken of trust as an appropriate framework for practical judgment and of institutions as possible enhancers or inhibitors of trust. We will now refer to three factors in the public sphere that can and do have a negative influence on practical judgment: misinformation, disinformation and fake news.

There are, however, other factors of some importance (propaganda, gossip, defamation, etc.), which we will not deal with now, largely because they have historically evolved and socially expanded into the three forms mentioned. Let us say, from the outset, that these are voluntary deformations of the truth and that, from the moral point of view, they are in the realm of lying. Since our point of view now is fundamentally epistemological, let us briefly describe how these factors influence—negatively—knowledge, and more specifically practical judgment.

It is quite obvious that the perception of truth, in human communication, passes through rhetoric and persuasion. In other words, in order to communicate the truth, it is not enough to transmit information, but it must be done in a convincing way. Now, precisely because the perception of truth does not depend only on the content of knowledge, but also on the way in which it is transmitted in language, it happens then that the possibility of controlling this transmission for alternative purposes (not necessarily perverse) opens up.

If we want to establish a difference between the factors mentioned above, we can say that 1) misinformation is false information that is disseminated, regardless of whether
there is an intention to deceive; 2) disinformation is deliberately misleading information, that manipulates the account of facts; 3) fake news is purposely fabricated, misleading or outright invented information that imitates the form of objective communication (Bennett and Livingston 2021, 3–40).

The purposes of these deviations in the transmission of information can be varied, but they are usually in line with the control of political power or economic profit. Today we speak, for example, of an ‘attention market’, that is, a space of supply and demand whose product consists of directing the attention of potential clients (Patino 2019). Although these activities or ‘new markets’ are not necessarily harmful, they make a strongly instrumental use of information, so that they easily move in the sphere of the three factors mentioned above.

In the first place, misinformation has a double result, objective and subjective: it hinders the exercise of practical judgment and consequently generates skepticism. Although it does not intrinsically include a misleading intention, it nonetheless implies responsibility, since it is often the result of haste, laziness or simply weakness in the search for and transmission of objective information.

It is perhaps in the realm of misinformation that we can place what is usually called ‘bullshit’, to which Harry Frankfurt has devoted acute reflections:

When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. (Frankfurt 2005, 56)

This is a phenomenon that is spreading alarmingly not only in common relationships, but also in official communications and scientific works. It is worrying in the current situation the proliferation of pseudo-scientific statements which are coming precisely from scientists (and many more from non-scientists). Frankfurt finds a possible explanation for this proliferation in the pressure (real or imaginary) of having to talk about what is not known:

Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. (Frankfurt 2005, 63)

On the other hand, disinformation already implies the manipulation of reality with a harmful purpose. In addition to the previously mentioned effects, this deviation causes much greater harm, since it is an activity that explicitly seeks to instrumentalize the truth, deliberately attacking the common good and freedom. In fact, the use of disinformation has been employed as a war tactic since ancient times, in what is often called ‘psychological warfare’. If its use in times of conflict is highly dubious from a moral point of view, there is no doubt about its malice in times of peace, since it constitutes a profound and unjustified violence against the right of access to information.

This right derives directly from the fundamental right to freedom of expression, which is contained in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (United Nations 1948, no. 19)
Of course, there is no right to be informed about everything, just as there is no right to know everything. Truth and knowledge have different orders, to which natural human inclinations relate differently. Thus, a wife has a right to know intimate aspects of her husband’s life; but a stranger does not. The right we are talking about here refers to ‘public facts that concern the common good, either to favor it or to harm it’ (García López 1979, 212). Therefore, disinformation in this area constitutes an injury to the common good.

The case of fake news is even more complex. The adjective ‘fake’ is of great importance here, since that deviant information is an imitation of reality with the deliberate intention of hiding it. It is, therefore, a double lie, or a second-level lie. The result is even more harmful than in the previous cases, since it does not only seek to hide things, but to divert knowledge. Perhaps this double harm can be understood if we compare it to the case of a false accusation in a court of law: it would not only prevent the punishment of the guilty but would also harm an innocent person.

Therefore, the seriousness of fake news lies not only in what this type of deviant information has of ‘obstruction’ to knowledge, but also in what it has of ‘construction’ of a non-knowledge. This type of news tends to constitute a ‘bundle of lies’ or ‘lies as a system’, which makes it particularly perverse and leads us to speak, in our days, of the emergence of post-truth.

The problem with these communicative mechanisms is not that they are persuasive or even deceptive, but that they progressively constitute a ‘culture of falsehood’, which prevents the perception of reality and destroys the social fabric, with serious consequences for education and the common good, among other areas. As Hannah Arendt has pointed out,

> The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed. (Arendt 1993, 257)

Hannah Arendt realized that the distinction between true and false is essential as a ‘sense of orientation’ in the world, and that cancelling this sense implies destroying something very deep in our humanity. For the human being, knowledge is the most basic and necessary nourishment.

11. Intellectual virtues and critical thinking

We said at the beginning of these pages that, when our bond with reality is threatened, the first line of defense should be knowledge and lucidity. Now we can add that this knowledge must be both contemplative and practical. Contemplative, in the first place, because it must be faithful to the things themselves. In fact, at the beginning of the 20th century, Edmund Husserl had highlighted the need to go ‘back to the things themselves” to avoid getting lost in our own representations (Husserl 2001, 168).

The human spirit must therefore maintain the effort to direct its gaze to things themselves and to recognize the obstacles that impede our clear vision of them. But this effort would not be possible if it were not prepared and, in some way, defended by
practical knowledge, which informs us of the difference between the means and the ends.

Since the end of the 20th century, some authors have been developing a line of research known as ‘virtue epistemology’. It is a repositioning of the theme of intellectual virtues, in line with the rehabilitation of the concept of virtue in a moral context since the last quarter of the last century. Without going into the differences between these authors, it is certain that a good part of them share an inspiration in the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition. What this line of thought has shown, in a global way, is the need to ‘form reason’ through its own habits, which Aristotle called intellectual or dianoetic virtues (Ethica Nic., I, 13, 1103 a 3–10). These virtues, as we have already indicated, can refer both to theoretical knowledge and to practical knowledge. In turn, the latter field is divided, as we have already seen, into ‘practical-moral’ (referring to praxis) and ‘practical-technical’ (referring to poiesis).

From these premises and from the reflections we have presented so far, it is pertinent to ask ourselves: how can personal judgment be formed in practical affairs? Our suggestion is that the formation of personal judgment in practical matters can be summarized in the concept of ‘critical thinking’. This is a relatively popular expression nowadays, especially in the pedagogical field. I certainly consider many proposals along these lines to be valid, but here I am going to give this expression a more classical meaning, namely, a thinking that is exercised in judgment from an adequate disposition towards the truth of things. In other words, I understand critical thinking as thinking that knows how to judge.

Perhaps this approach—which I do not consider excessively original—sheds light on the scarce application of virtue epistemology to the practical realm. The reason for this may well be that such application consists essentially in re-reading and going deeper into what Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas had to say about practical judgment and the virtues that perfect it. It seems to us, in fact, that the key to the formation of personal judgment in practical affairs lies in understanding the scope of prudence (Aristotelian phronesis) as a dianoetic virtue.

The first thing we can say about prudence as a dianoetic virtue is that it does not stand alone, that is, it is sustained by other virtues and, in turn, disposes toward other virtues. The relationship between all of them is circular, for they all constitute a certain ‘organism’ (Aquinas, Summa, I-II, q. 65). These virtues, therefore, can be considered as means and fruits of prudence. Although we cannot describe them in detail now, we can point out some of them, such as humility, sincerity, constancy (Millán-Puelles 2009, 534–553), the right desire to know (studiositas) and intellectual courage (Ramos 2005, 274–280).

The recta ratio agibilium, the right reason of things to be done: this is what Thomas Aquinas calls prudence, following Aristotle (Aquinas, Summa, I-II, q. 56, a. 3), and, like the Greek philosopher, he distinguishes it from theoretical science (scientia, episteme) and technical skill (ars, techne). It is important to focus, first of all, on two aspects of this definition. On the one hand, it is a recta ratio, that is, ‘ordered reason’. This is the main disposition that prudence gives to reason for its exercise: order. Indeed, this virtue helps us to know, judge and reason ‘orderly’. And this order translates into efficiency when it comes to practical knowledge, such as we are pondering.
But we must also consider the second part of the definition: prudence refers to praxis, not to poiesis (which is dealt with by art or craft), and this distinguishes it from calculus or the simple manipulation of objects. Praxis, in fact, is the action finalized to the perfection of the one who performs it, not of something external. Thus, while practical-technical knowledge is pragmatic or instrumental, practical-moral knowledge is self-developing. Therefore, prudence is the disposition of practical reason to act correctly in the sphere of activities that perfect us intrinsically.

It also follows that instrumental reason (practical reason insofar as it is concerned with poiesis) is controlling and constructivist, while ethical reason (practical reason insofar as it is concerned with praxis) is respectful and inquisitive. One application of this is that the first step in forming practical judgment is to be willing to observe reality as it is. As Pieper says,

[...] prudence is the standard of volition and action; but the standard of prudence, on the other hand, is the ipsa res, the ‘thing itself’, the objective reality of being. And therefore the pre-eminence of prudence signifies first of all the direction of volition and action toward truth; but finally it signifies the directing of volition and action toward objective reality. The good is prudent beforehand; but that is prudent which is in keeping with reality. (Pieper 1966, 9)

Perhaps it could be thought from here that the only way to perceive and judge practical reality is disinterest. This is only partially true and, therefore, partially false. In fact, the concepts of ‘practical reality’ and ‘interest’ are convertible, so disinterest would make all practical action impossible. But if we understand disinterest as respect for the proper ends of things and, in parallel, interest as instrumental mastery of the means, then the concept of ‘practical reality’ is revealed in all its force: that in which the practical dimension depends on reality and not the other way around.

For a practical judgment to be true, therefore, it must respect the nature of things, and in order to respect it, the will itself must be well disposed. Ultimately, therefore, the epistemological rightness of practical judgment—practical truth—rests on moral dispositions. Hence Thomas Aquinas affirms:

[...] since prudence is the right reason of things to be done, it is a condition thereof that man be rightly disposed in regard to the principles of this reason of things to be done, that is in regard to their ends, to which man is rightly disposed by the rectitude of the will. (Summa, I-II, q. 56, a. 3)

From the epistemological point of view, disinterestedness rightly understood is equivalent to knowing how to maintain a critical distance, which requires self-mastery on the moral level. Critical distance here does not mean detachment or indifference, but perspective.

In his autobiographical account, C. S. Lewis (1955, 150) denounced the reduction of distance as a result of modern transportation. In reality, this reduction is nothing more than the ‘immediacy’ necessary to be in control of things, which is the typical attitude of enlightened modernity. But this suppression of space has at least two serious consequences: an exponential increase in speed, which makes personal experience unviable, and the disappearance of a rational mediation of that experience, which is reduced to a heap of impressions. This is what we can observe today in digital media, in the use of which the lucidity we spoke of earlier becomes difficult or impossible.
Practical judgment therefore requires distance and time, in order to have a correct and respectful experience of reality, both about other people and the world, and this respect is built with moral dispositions.

12. Conclusion: the knowledge we have lost in information

The formation of personal judgment in practical matters requires the formation of prudence and the other intellectual virtues, and this formation requires upright moral dispositions. If practical judgment requires a healthy critical distance, this implies overcoming the perspective of mere instrumentality in order to look at things in a contemplative way. For this reason, it is necessary not to allow oneself to be dragged by the possibilities of the means, and to use those means towards ends that can serve the good of individuals and society.

In his reflections on bullshit, Harry Frankfurt wondered about the cause of the abundance of this distortion of truth in today’s society. The first reason, as mentioned above, is the social pressure—especially on public figures—to talk about subjects of which they are ignorant. Alongside this, he continued, another cause is the widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything (Frankfurt 2005, 63–64).

Interpreting Frankfurt’s diagnosis and extending it beyond the phenomenon of bullshit, it does not seem unreasonable to think that we are in a society prey to information anxiety. Knowledge has become globalized, both in terms of its content and its recipients, and this also allows the multiplication of opinions on facts, which are difficult to know in depth. Already in the first half of the last century, T. S. Eliot had launched this question, which sounded almost like a reproach: ‘Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?’ (Eliot 1934, 7).

It does not seem that knowledge and information are necessarily opposed, but the extension of information—if the mechanism pointed out by Frankfurt is correct—seems to multiply opinions, rather than wisdom or, in the best case, true science about facts. For this reason, the formation of personal judgment in practical affairs should, in our opinion, involve a greater distance from the multitude of opinions and a deeper study of the sources.

Note

1. A short time before him, British politician Philip Snowden wrote almost the same in his Introduction to the book Truth and the War, by Edmund Dene Morel (Snowden 1916). The context was World War I as well. On other possible sources of this quotation, see: https://quoteinvestigator.com/2020/04/11/casualty/. Accessed 1 May 2021.

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