

Which truth?  
Response to Samuel Baker's  
"Aristotle on Truth and Practical Truth: *NE VI.2*"

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What is practical truth for Aristotle? I'll first give a quick summary of Samuel's paper as I understand the main argument and then I'll offer a minor concern I have about his account. Baker locates practical truth in Aristotle as a kind of truth we get from the *ergon* of intellectual activity (i.e. thinking). There are two kinds of intellectual activity, theoretical and practical. Baker points out in Aristotle's account, though the two kinds of intellectual activity are of the same power, theoretical thinking and practical thinking have different ends (*DA III 10*, 433a14-15). The end of theoretical activity is truth itself—what we call propositional truth, truths that involve affirmation and negation in thinking (*Metaphysics E4* 1027b25-27). The end of practical activity however, is action (*Metaphysics α 1*, 993b19-31). Because the end of practical activity is action, there is no necessity in practical truth like there is in theoretical truth, as actions are always what could have been otherwise; actions are accidental (Baker, p. 4). As Aristotle reminds us, people don't deliberate about what cannot be otherwise, we deliberate when we have choices. So truth in practical activity is not simply a correct cognitive achievement like it is in theoretical truth, additionally practical truth includes correct desire in the agent as it contributes to decision-making and choice, together these lead to action (Baker, p. 5-7). Therefore the difference between truth *simpliciter* and practical truth is that the first is primary and theoretical, concerned with active propositional thought—the sort of thought that involves affirmation and negation (Baker, p. 2). Baker's account makes the second

derivative of the first. Baker explains: “one truth is the cause of the other...[where]... one truth (“this is not bad”) *participates* in the truth of the other (“this is good”)” (Baker, p. 5). Practical truth is derivative of truth *simpliciter* because in practical truth, we desire the truth that leads to action. Whereas theoretical truth is found in the conclusion of unmediated propositions, practical truth is a special kind of conclusion, where the desire for correct action is “transferred to the conclusion” from the premises (Baker, p. 4-6).

Baker claims that Aristotle is talking here about one truth, truth in the primary sense that is found only in thought, so, propositional thought and truth in its secondary, derivative sense found in the result of propositional thought with correct desire and deliberation resulting in action. One of the claims Baker makes in his analysis is that Aristotle allows for different degrees of truth, that there are more or less accurate truths, and the more accurate a truth is, the more truer the truth is (Baker, p. 8). For truth *simpliciter*, we desire what is most true, the truth of universal principles. For truth in practical thought, we desire that truth that is going to have the closest approximation to achieving our intended goal.

At first I was skeptical with an account that would allow for degrees in truth, especially one that allows for degrees in truth for both theoretical and practical reasoning. But I’m thinking of the problem like mathematical truths that are mostly binary; propositions that are either true or false. Yet think of any activity we do, we actually don’t hold fast to binary propositions. For example, when we follow a recipe for cooking, we follow the instructions for measurement and ingredients to the degree in which we desire to attain the end result. If we want a Sachertorte, for example, our measurements must be as precise as possible, the ingredients as true to ingredient list that the

instructions would allow. If we fall far from hitting the mark with any of the variables, the measuring, the ingredients, the cooking time, etc., we achieve an end product that is more or less a Sachertorte to the degree in which we deviated from the recipe. Yet at what point, what degree of deviance do we need so that we can we say that we no longer have made a Sachertorte?

I'd like Baker to spell out more what it means to have a singular account of truth that connects practical truth to theoretical truth.

If Aristotle's account of truth is singular and admits the more and the less true, then on one end of the spectrum you have absolute truth, a binary truth and on the other end the binary blurs or disappears altogether and you have an approximation of truth. As I understand Baker, theoretical truth would lie at the binary end (something is either true or false, *simpliciter*) and so is demonstrably necessary. Practical truth lies at the approximation end, that something is either more or less true, but not absolutely true, as it is dealing with human action, deliberation and choice. There is no necessity in these variables of practical truth (human action, deliberation and choice) as they are accidental and can be otherwise. If this is right, it seems to me that Aristotle is talking about two different kinds of truth, where one operates in necessity and the other operates contingently. It seems that if there is any truth that does admit of degree, only practical truth can admit truth in degrees because practical truth depends on particulars and what is achievable, and these can always be otherwise. Theoretical truth, as I understand Baker's Aristotle, is universal and cannot admit truth in degrees. He points out the straightforward reading of *Metaphysics* E 4: " 'The false and the true are not in things, as if the good were true and the bad directly false, but in thought' (1027b25-27)." I take it that it is the

propositional thinking about the world and the correctness of such thinking (i.e., the affirmation and negation about the world state of affairs) that determines the truth and falsity of theoretical thinking. The propositions either match up with the world correctly or they don't, this is the binary of theoretical truth. Practical truth, on the other hand, involves the variables of human deliberation, desire, choice and action, so there are many different ways to achieve one's good and probably many more different ways one can go wrong to achieve one's good. For Baker, it is one and the same truth, yet the pursuit of each one (truth *simpliciter* and practical truth) has different ends. It is a small point, but I just don't see how the degrees of truth can apply both to universal propositions and particular propositions. Can Aristotle's account allow for absolute truth in the binary sense and say that the same truth is found in degrees in practical truth? What would prevent us from saying that there are only degrees of universal and practical truths, such that nothing is ever absolutely true or false, and so we can only find certainty in degree?