Phrónēsis, Aristotle, and Action Research

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This article presents an interpretation of Aristotelian phrónēsis and its relevance for action research. After pointing out some insufficiencies in how phrónēsis is applied by other interpreters with relevance for action research, I present my own interpretation of Aristotle’s concept in the wider context of his thinking on intellectual and ethical virtues. The article’s conclusion is that phrónēsis is very important for both action researchers and others. But at the same time, phrónēsis is not a concept that can be adopted by itself, alone, and in isolation from other intellectual and ethical virtues or ways of knowing. Phrónēsis is necessary, but at the same time insufficient. Phrónēsis is not a concept primarily concerned with learning, inquiry, and research. Its primary focus is “application”, performance, or enactment. Action research has a lot to learn from Aristotle, and phrónēsis is definitely among the things to be learned. Aristotle’s praxis-orientation sticks even deeper, however. This more profound praxis-orientation becomes quite invisible by operating with simplified and mutually exclusive divisions between phrónēsis, tékhne, and epistêmē, and by conflating other distinctions that were important to maintain for Aristotle. Aristotle’s profound praxis-orientation is even more central to action research. It has to do with dialogue or dialectics whose tasks really are fundamentally concerned with learning, inquiry, and research.

Key words: Action research, Aristotle, Dialogical research, Judgement, Phrónēsis, Prudence, Rhetoric, Virtues, ethical and intellectual