

# **A Pedagogical and Psychological Perspective on Phronesis and it's Role in Character Education**

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A Pedagogical and Psychological Perspective on Phronesis, Moral Reasoning  
Development, and their Overlapping Roles in Character Education

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## The Context and Problem

The second half of the twentieth century included two trends in education and psychology. One is the increased focus on the intellect and rationality. In psychology, the popularity of the work of cognitive psychologists, most notably Jean Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), combined with a decrease in emphasis in both behaviorist and psychodynamic theories, led to the ascendance of the study of the development of rational decision-making in children and adolescents. In education, various forces combined to narrow the purview of schools to learning academic content and skills; in essence, on knowing and reasoning.

The second trend was the acceptance of morality, values, and virtue as legitimate areas of focus. Piaget again, this time indirectly, was involved in this change. His early 20<sup>th</sup> century work on children's reasoning about moral issues (Piaget, 1965) led to Lawrence Kohlberg's (1984) ground-breaking work on the stages of development of the logical structures of moral reasoning. Kohlberg understood that the social science study of morality was professionally frowned upon and worked at legitimizing it by integrating his work with ethical philosophy, at first by directly addressing philosophical issues such as how to go from psychological data (the "is") to judgments of ethical adequacy (the "ought") (Kohlberg, 1971), and later by collaborating with Jurgen Habermas to integrate developmental psychology with social critical theory and communicative ethics, a project that was left in a nascent state by Kohlberg's premature death.

Hence, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both psychology and education were primed to focus on the role of moral cognition in human functioning and development. Schools were

focused intensively on cognitive learning and development and social science was open to the study of moral psychology, especially from a cognitive perspective. Further setting the scene for the increased focus on moral reasoning, judgment, and decision-making was the increased societal concern about youth problem behavior. Society was calling for ways to lead adolescents in particular to make better choices in domains such as delinquency, violence, substance abuse, sexuality, suicidal behavior, and academic integrity.

Interestingly, while contemporary scholars wax poetic about the moral misbehaviors of youth, Aristotle similarly opined about their weaknesses of character:

Young men have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately. Of the bodily desires, it is the sexual by which they are most swayed and in which they show absence of self-control. They are changeable and fickle in their desires...They are hot-tempered, and quick-tempered, and apt to give way to their anger...They look at the good side rather than the bad, not having yet witnessed many instances of wickedness. They trust others readily, because they have not yet often been cheated...They would always rather do noble deeds than useful ones: their lives are regulated more by moral feeling than by reasoning...All their mistakes are in the direction of doing things excessively and vehemently...They think they know everything; this, in fact, is why they overdo everything. (*Rhetoric II*: 12:1389a-b)

Yet, despite social conditions supporting a focus on moral education, a social science and pedagogical emphasis of nurturing the development of moral rationality and decision-making did not manifest itself prominently. One reason was the premature death of Kohlberg in 1987, slowing the momentum of the study of moral reasoning development and the pedagogical design of ways to promote it in schools. This followed on the heels of the gradual waning of the popularity of Piaget's general constructivist theory, upon which Kohlberg's work was built. In fact, Kohlberg was often heard to overly modestly opine that "I don't have a theory. Piaget has a theory. I have stages."

A second reason for the failure to thrive of a cognitive approach to moral development was the resurgence of the character education movement in the US (and now in many other parts of the world). Character education has a long history in the US and had been dominated by an approach that has strong elements of behaviorism, even while invoking Aristotelian virtue ethics. As the Kohlbergian moral development movement began to decline after his death in 1987, the rebirth of character education began in earnest only five years later in 1992 with the establishment of both the Character Education Partnership (now Character.org) and Character Counts. Constructivist theories tended to emphasize the role of the individual in making meaning of his or her world and experiences, whereas the more behaviorist character education adherents tended to favor the role of the environment (parents, school, church, society) in shaping the morality of the developing child. Pedagogical applications clearly reflected that, with Kohlberg experimenting with democratic schools and peer discussions of complex moral issues and character educators emphasizing authorities teaching about character and rewarding character. Ironically, the character education movement (and subsequently the positive psychology movement) emphasized virtues, often from an Aristotelian perspective, but neglected the moral reasoning element of virtue (phronesis).

As the shift from constructivism to character education occurred, the phronesis baby was thrown out with the constructivist bathwater. Pedagogical strategies that nurtured the capacity of the child to be an autonomous moral decision-maker were given far less priority than pedagogical strategies that taught the child what is right and wrong and that shaped moral behavior and ultimately virtue. The grand irony is that these allegedly Aristotelian approaches to moral formation (character education) de-emphasized phronesis. At best in the character

education world, phronesis is understood as wisdom and relegated to one among many virtues. More typically it is omitted from the character formation project entirely.

### The Scope of this Analysis

I am a developmental psychologist by training and an educational psychologist by application. I am not a philosopher, so this analysis will attempt to straddle these three disciplines while not being exemplary in any of them (Berkowitz, 2014). What I hope to accomplish here is an analysis of why character education should incorporate phronesis as a central goal and how it connects to existing emphases in character development and education theory and practice. Given the complexity of understanding the concept of phronesis and its various interpretations and renderings, I will rely on the excellent work and perspective of Kristjánsson (2014, 2015a, 2015b). Given the necessary brevity of this paper and the need to integrate disparate literatures and disciplines, this paper will be designed to highlight points of argument and foment future discussion, rather than to settle a case.

### Kristjánsson on Phronesis

In an excellent analysis of the landscape of philosophical interpretations of Aristotle's concept of phronesis, Kristjánsson (2015a) identifies three important points of contention; i.e., whether phronesis is universal or relative, whether it is general or particular, and whether it is natural and painless or ambivalent and painful. He argues that full understanding of Aristotle and how Aristotle understood phronesis would best characterize it as a universal and general virtue that does not develop naturally and painlessly but rather through a complex struggle. It

is precisely this rendering that will be argued as a good fit for developmental psychological theory of relevance (Kohlberg, 1984) and derivative pedagogical theories and applications.

Following Aristotle's account, Kristjánsson (2015a) describes phronesis as an intellectual meta-virtue that "guides the moral virtues" (p. 302). Born of habituated characteristics, it provides the intellectual capacity and tendency to critically reflect on moral virtues, thus making them "reason-able" rather than merely habitual. The purposes or functions of phronesis go beyond merely justifying virtues and their resulting actions, but also to integrate them and guide them to the developmental purpose of human beings; i.e., Eudaimonia. It further serves as the adjudicator between conflicting virtues. In essence, Kristjánsson argues that reasoning is ultimately extracted from virtues and assigned to phronesis. "This intellectual virtue helps the moral virtues find their right ends and the suitable means to their ends" (Kristjánsson, 2015a, p. 302). Phronesis requires primary ethical principles and the desire (motivation) to act according to those principles. In a parallel fashion, we have repeatedly defined character as those psychological characteristics that both motivate and enable one to act as a competent moral agent. Finally, the development of phronesis requires experience in the world.

In conclusion, phronesis is a developmental outcome of experience-enriched reflection upon earlier habituated characteristics. It serves as the intellectual meta-virtue making all moral virtues reflective, integrated, and directed toward Eudaimonia. It is the arbiter of moral conflicts; i.e., between conflicting virtues. Hence we can ascribe the following characteristics to this understanding of phronesis:

- Intellectual (a cognitive function; understanding and adjudicating between considerations)
- Developmental (there are precursor stages and requires maturation and experience)
- Moral (focused on moral content and aimed toward moral flourishing)
- Universal (it is part of human development and not specific to a given culture, etc.)
- Integrative (it serves to coordinate the full set of virtues and their connection to Eudaimonia and moral action)

### Moral Reasoning Development

Given the cognitive, developmental, moral and universal dimensions of phronesis, it seems quite natural to look for points of connection with moral reasoning development theory (Kohlberg, 1984). Kohlberg, building on Piaget (1965), posited a universal process of the development of six universal stages of moral reasoning and judgment. The theory argues first that cognitive development occurs through an invariant sequence of stages of reasoning, with each more complex and adequate than the preceding one which it subsumes. The development itself happens as a product of the interaction between maturation and experience in a complex way. The current stage of thinking, which can be understood as a “meaning-making system,” encounters new aspects of the environment (very widely defined) and either can make adequate sense of it or is not developed enough to do so. In the latter case this causes cognitive disequilibrium between the existing meaning making system (stage) and the experiences the individual is attempting to understand. Such disequilibrium is experienced as cognitive conflict. If the necessary preconditions are in place and enough disequilibrium



ensues, then one may construct a new and more adequate stage of reasoning (meaning making system).

For Piaget, these stages applied mostly to the inanimate world (physics, chemistry, logic, mathematics, etc.). It becomes more complex when reasoning deals with social content, as that content can reason back at the individual. Selman () described such stages of interpersonal reasoning. While Piaget (1965) began an initial study of stages of reasoning about morality, it was an unfinished endeavor until Kohlberg picked it up in the 1950s. He eventually identified six stages of moral reasoning development, which have been described and studied frequently (e.g., Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

James Rest (1986) expanded Kohlberg's model to include three other relevant functions. Rest posited a "four component" model of which Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning comprised the second component. The first is moral sensitivity; i.e., the proclivity and ability to notice moral issues. The second is Kohlberg's described intellectual capacity to reason about and resolve moral issues ethically. The third is the process of choosing a course of action (moral or other). The fourth is the capacity to enact the chosen course of action. These will be revisited later in the next section on aligning phronesis with moral reasoning.

### Phronesis and Moral Reasoning

It is clear that phronesis and moral reasoning are not synonymous. Phronesis is understood as directed toward the holistic moral flourishing of the person (Eudaimonia) whereas moral reasoning is much more limited in focusing on deciding what is moral. Phronesis is about virtue (the nature of the person) and moral reasoning is about ethical

principles and choosing morally justifiable courses of action in specific situations. Nevertheless, there is significant correspondence between the two concepts. These will be dealt with in turn.

Moral focus. Kohlberg's stages are specifically about reasoning about moral issues and phronesis is about reasoning about moral virtues. Neither is applicable to non-moral concerns. They are playing in the same sandbox.

Cognitive function. Phronesis is an intellectual virtue. Moral reasoning is a cognitive developmental phenomenon. Both are about reasoning about right and wrong. They are functions of the intellect.

Universal. Both Aristotle and Kohlberg argue that they have identified aspects that are fundamental to what it means to be human; i.e., they are part of human nature and as such they are universal and not relativistic or specific to a given time, culture, society, or other human sub-group.

Developmental. One is neither born with nor predestined to inevitably develop either higher stages of moral reasoning nor phronesis. Surely the potential exists in the nature of being human for such development but it is not inevitable. As Kristjánsson (2015a) suggests, neither is it smooth and painless. The very nature of the Piagetian disequibration process entails a cognitive struggle with the resulting affective experience of cognitive conflict, which makes it analogous to what Kristjánsson describes for the "painful" process of developing and applying phronesis.

Integrating phronesis and moral reasoning. Clearly there are many points of correspondence between Aristotle's concept of phronesis and Kohlberg's concept of moral reasoning. They are both slow and not inevitable developmental cognitive phenomena concerned with issues of universal and general morality. However, phronesis is a philosophical concept describing psychological functioning whereas moral reasoning is a psychological concept with philosophical justifications. Furthermore, moral reasoning has been directly and explicitly applied to various forms of developmental interventions, most notably education and parenting. While both are fundamentally cognitive in nature, phronesis is a much richer concept integrating intellectual functions with virtue, holistic flourishing, and behavior as an integrated whole. Moral reasoning on the other hand has causal links to behavior, but is functionally independent of behavior. It is regarding these latter points that Rest's (1986) four component model is helpful. His third and fourth components (choosing a course of action and enacting it) add to the Kohlbergian moral reasoning stages more of the elements of phronesis.

#### A Speculative Developmental Theory of Phronesis

Certainly Aristotle has something to say about the development of phronesis. It requires maturity and time and is borne of less mature moral characteristics, most notably habituation. However, this is a relatively simple developmental theory, and with the advent of a science of developmental psychology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is likely much more we can now say. As a starting point, it is necessary to identify the elements of mature phronesis that would be the end products of moral development. We have already identified some important candidates. Phronesis requires experience. It also requires sophisticated logical reasoning capacities, including social cognitive capacities (e.g., mature perspective-taking). Because

phronesis is directed at morality and human flourishing, it also requires specifically moral cognitive capacities. However, the focus on holistic integrated virtue that is at the heart of the purpose and function of phronesis likely also requires a mature moral identity. Briefly, each of these will be discussed in turn and in a developmental framework.

Habits. Aristototle posits that virtues stem from habituated behaviors. Habits come from repeated behaviors that have some value. The value originally comes from a combination of external consequences (rewards and praise for desirable behavior) and imitating valued others (role models). It is through the mature reflection that these habits become reasoned virtues (more on this later).

Moral focus. While the meta-ethical question of “why be moral?” is well beyond the scope of this reflection, it is clear that phronesis entails a focus on or orientation toward the good. Beyond merely habitually doing the good, one must desire or value the good. For Aristotle, there is a unity of doing and valuing. Knowing the good entails being motivated toward doing the good and this understanding and knowing entails selection of the right acts to manifest the good. It is difficult to psychologically disentangle this “holy trinity” (the “head, heart, and hand”) of virtue. Regardless of how it is understood psychologically, at the minimum it must include a valuing of the good, an orientation toward the good. In psychological terms this should include the development of a moral identity; i.e., a sense of the integrity of one’s self-system that prioritizes being a moral person (a person of virtue). While a relatively recent area of focus in psychology, moral identity is beginning to be understood more clearly. One aspect of identity is that it requires sophisticated self-reflection. Erikson (1968) claims that the development of identity in general is the universal psychological work of adolescence (although

there are precursors in earlier eras and continued work throughout adulthood). It entails taking the time to reflect on and evaluate oneself, in part in contrast to one's self-constructed sense of an ideal self; i.e., what am I like and how do I stack up against who I think I ideally ought to be? Another aspect is that it requires socialization by individuals and institutions (family, faith community, school, etc.) that model and promote a moral focus. Identity, according to Erikson, is an integrative aspect of personality, which aligns nicely with the Aristotelian concept of the unity of virtue, which is also part of the primary focus specifically of phronesis.

Cognitive capacity. As already noted, phronesis requires a set of cognitive competencies including general logical thinking, social cognition, and moral reasoning. These in turn require specific conditions for development. Maturation is part of the formula, but it must happen in a context of opportunities to grapple with increasingly (as development progresses) complex logical, social and moral problems. Such grappling should be both individual and collaborative. As one attempts to apply one's current level of cognition to increasingly challenging issues, the pressure (cognitive conflict) to create more complex and adequate logical systems increases in order to resolve the imbalance (disequilibrium) between the adequacy of one's current level of cognition and the problems to which it is being applied. This is a gradual life-span process. Supporting such logical structures are also learned strategies such as conflict-resolution strategies, which allow one to more effectively channel and apply one's cognitive competencies.

A Preliminary Developmental Pedagogy of Phronesis and Moral Reasoning

Using the above conceptual anatomy of phronesis, its cognitive underpinnings, and its psychological elements, we have sketched an outline of the developmental processes that support the ultimate development of phronesis. Now we turn to how to design a pedagogy for the development of phronesis. While this project is speculative and preliminary, it provides a lens through which to consider thinking about how to educate for phronesis. Clearly this must be understood in the context of phronesis as a life-span developmental outcome that is only manifested in mature adulthood. Nevertheless, schooling can support early stages of the developmental passage to phronesis including the developmental components and prerequisites for phronesis. One would not expect secondary school students to have an integrated virtue structure supported by practical wisdom, but one could expect secondary school students to be mature moral reasoners with a strong moral identity, as well as an ideal moral identity that includes being an integrated person of virtue, a teleological goal (moral purpose) toward which one guides one own developmental journey. Interestingly, recently Qashmer (2016) has demonstrated that middle schools with deeper emphases on and implementation of character education have students who score higher on measures of moral identity and ideal moral identity.

If the foregoing is accurate, then schools that are contexts for supporting the potential development of phronesis should have a number of characteristics. First, they should from the earliest stages be communities that both model and espouse a moral purpose (Damon, 2008). There should be an explicit overt focus on a clearly defined vision of virtue, often manifested as a list of core virtues, such as the Jubilee Centre's "Knightly Virtues" or the Narnian virtues studied by Mark Pike and his associates at the University of Leeds. This should include however

a more general valuing of integrated human moral integrity, in the truest sense of the word; i.e., a fully integrated moral core. At the earliest stages this will likely manifest as a set of core concepts that are concretized, modeled, encouraged, taught, practiced and affirmed, with the goal of habituation.

Modestly at first, and more earnestly as the children develop, there should be pedagogical structures and models for deep reflection on the nature of and justification for these aspects of moral agency. On one level this can be done through a curriculum of study of the virtues. More deeply this can entail making one's virtue and character as a whole into a self-project as is done in the many incarnations of the Templeton Foundation's Laws of Life program (e.g., the Inspire/Aspire project of Character Scotland).

This general reflection on the deeper meaning of virtues and other aspects of moral agency overlaps with the self-reflective process that allows for both the development of moral identity and the nurturance of a primary moral focus for one's life.

The development of the logical and socio-moral cognitive aspects of phronesis require a constructivist pedagogy. Rather than merely providing ideas and answers to problems, constructivism requires the provision of problems (including moral problems) to solve and the pedagogical structures to allow for student grappling with complex and challenging social and moral problems. Kohlberg's core strategies were (1) guided peer discussions of moral dilemmas (Berkowitz, 1985) and (2) the social engineering of classrooms and schools into just and caring democratic communities where students were given legitimate authority and voice to craft and govern their school communities toward principles of justice (Kohlberg, Power &

Higgins, 1989). This latter strategy suggests a more sociological lens on the nature of the organizational structure of classrooms and schools. To discover one's voice as a moral agent, to craft of moral identity as well as an ideal moral identity that optimally prioritize being and becoming a virtuous person, and to have the opportunity and modeling of continuous grappling with challenging moral issues, one needs to be in a school and classroom climate (Cohen, et al., 2015) that is democratic, just, caring and explicitly focused on moral development. This is quite contrary to the typically nurturing but authoritarian institutions that most schools and classrooms are, and hence is a challenging proposition.

While modeling is embedded in many of the ideas already proposed, it is worth taking a moment to discuss it separately. Having valued others who manifest phronesis (or any other desirable moral characteristic) both helps make it a priority and teaches how to manifest it oneself. Hence a school populated with adults who are dedicated to virtue and who act virtuously, including using phronesis to manage their lives, is deeply supportive of the developmental journey of students toward phronesis. This must start with the school leader (principal, head teacher) who not only serves as the lead model but also intentionally and strategically selects for and guides toward such behavior in all the adults who populate the school community. Few school leaders recognize this task and fewer have the competencies to shepherd the development of an adult culture of virtue and virtue education.

### Conclusion

Following Kristjánsson (2014, 2015a, 2015b), phronesis is here understood as intellectual (cognitive), universal, developmental, integrative, and moral. It is the universal



cognitive capacity to understand and adjudicate between moral concerns (including virtues) and to guide one's personal journey to an integrated and applied life of virtue. Much of this maps directly onto the narrower but more psychological and pedagogical theory of moral reasoning development (Kohlberg, 1984), especially the developmental cognitive nature of it (of course along with the focus on morality). Other psychological aspects of phronesis, beyond the moral reasoning competency core of it, are a moral purpose or moral compass for one's life (including a real and ideal moral identity) and the early childhood development of moral habits upon which virtues are built.

This psychological model offers the opportunity to focus education on pedagogical strategies that are known to support the development of moral purpose/identity, moral reasoning, and habituation. Hence we can posit that the foundation of and trajectory toward the ultimate development of phronesis will rest upon classrooms and schools that are virtuous and empowering communities where students are surrounded by models of virtue in general and phronesis in particular, and where morality is a salient priority both in human behavior and in curricular content and methods. In the latter, a central part of the curriculum should be the ongoing reflection upon virtue and the self-project of reflecting upon and steering one's own character toward virtue in general and phronesis in particular. In addition, the cognitive component (logical and socio-moral reasoning) requires the curriculum to focus on the provision of and opportunity for individual and peer grappling with challenging moral issues (rather than the didactic teaching about and adult solution of such issues), in a context of authentically empowered democratic school and classroom structures, where authentic and personally meaningful moral choices need to be made.

Hopefully, this pioneering foray into the analysis of the psychology of phronesis and its development and education will generate further study and consideration leading to actual school models informed by theory and research.

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