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Phronesis

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Consider the following:

*You are the best man at your brother's wedding. You are bringing the wedding rings. The wedding is taking place in another city and your only chance to get to the wedding on time is to board the next train. Upon arriving at the train station, you notice that your wallet and your cell phone are missing. There is no time to talk to the police and other people at the station refuse your requests to use their phone or lend you money to call your brother. Desperate, you sit down on a bench in the main hall. You notice that the well-off person sitting next to you takes a phone call, stands up, and walks around the corner to talk in private. Left on the bench is the man's expensive jacket. You suddenly notice a ticket for your train half sticking out of this jacket. You could easily take this ticket without anybody noticing. It also appears this man could buy a replacement without any problems, as the train is half-empty. What should you do?*¹

Like many scenarios developed to assess moral reasoning, this one invites the reader to consider doing a kind of action that tends to be unethical. In this case, you are asked to imagine that you are your brother's negligent best man. Your brother has entrusted you with the wedding rings. Your job is to get the rings to your brother in time for the ceremony. Rather than arrive early and, say, help with the final preparations, rather than go to the wedding *with* your brother or with other members of the wedding party (as a best man might do, even if it required going to the other city the day before the wedding), you have decided to take the train on your own on the Big Day. Having made this decision, it has somehow seemed a good idea to aim for the *latest possible* train. You arrive at the station without your wallet or mobile. You ask other people for help. The spectacle of a person claiming to be the best man at their brother's wedding under these circumstances does not inspire trust. Why would they believe you? One or more of them may be on the verge of alerting security to the presence of a desperate person trying to get their hands on someone's mobile or money, claiming to be on the way to their brother's wedding and flashing some rings about as proof. Since no one is offering to give you what you need, it occurs to you that robbing one of them might be the perfect solution to your problem. The person who was sitting next to you has not taken the steps needed to secure his belongings. Perhaps he failed to notice the way in which others at the station have begun trying to avoid you. His trust in the world is your golden opportunity. If he can't be bothered with protecting himself against the likes of you—well, he's leaving himself wide open, isn't he?

This scenario is mild, compared to the many that are supposed to make it natural for the thoughtful reader to contemplate, understand, or condone acts that are ordinarily or always immoral.² Social scientific moral dilemmas constitute a prose genre of sorts. In the one I

¹ Igor Grossmann, Nic M. Westrate, Monika Ardelt, Justin P. Brienza, Vicki M. Dong, Michel Ferrari, Chao S. Hu, Howard C. Nusbaum & John Vernaeke, "Wisdom Science in a Polarized World: Knowns and Unknowns," [article forthcoming in *Psychological Inquiry*; mss. p. 12].

² See, e.g., Fiery Cushman & Joshua D. Greene, "Finding Faults: How moral dilemmas illuminate cognitive structure" *Social Neuroscience*, 2012, 7 (3): 269-279; Dries H. Bostyn, Sybren Sevenhandt, & Arne Roets, "Of

have lifted from very prominent researchers, the reader is marched down a narrowing prose corridor toward an act of theft. More extreme variants seek to march the reader down a prose corridor toward acts of murder.³ Still others seek to understand something about moral reasoning and its efficacy by challenging the reader to come up with a good account of *why* it is unacceptable to make a meal of the family dog or condone consensual brother-sister incest or accept exploratory cannibalism involving a body donated for medical research, and then concluding that those of us who find such acts ethically unacceptable without being able to give strong arguments against them must somehow hold the views a-rationally.⁴

Outside the confines of social science, a moral dilemma is a choice situation in which anything one does will be wrong. A strict dilemma presents exactly *two* options for choice. These are clearly exclusive—no agent could do both—and present themselves as exhaustive—there is *nothing else* that the agent could do.⁵ Since life situations almost never have this kind of structure it is very difficult to imagine a real-life choice situation where any small group of options presented are not only exclusive but also *exhaustive*. As near as I can tell, apart from artifice or a very strange set of contextual features that restrict the choice set, the only way to produce an exclusive and exhaustive dilemmic choice set is by treating “do A” and “don’t do A” as descriptions of *options*, where anything other than doing A counts as an instance of not doing A. In effect, as near as I can tell, much of the social scientific literature that turns on research involving moral dilemmas treats “don’t do A” as the name of an option.

Now, in real life and in moral philosophy, “don’t do A” may be tremendously important, but not for the reasons at issue in a lot of the social scientific research. Suppose that we agree with Aristotle and Aquinas that, although there are *no* absolute positive moral requirements—no kinds of act that cannot be made bad by circumstances or further intentions with which one does the thing in question—there *are* absolute prohibitions (kinds of act that it is always wrong to do). If we think that there are absolute moral prohibitions, then *avoiding* some kinds of acts may *always* be the most important aspect of a choice situation.⁶ The need to avoid doing things that count as acts of murder, torture, or rape, or working to secure the judicial condemnation of a person you know to be innocent, for example, may well override *any other concern* at issue in a choice situation. Not all moral-dilemma-focused social

Mice, Men, and Trolleys: Hypothetical Judgment Versus Real-Life Behavior in Trolley-Style Moral Dilemmas” *Psychological Science*, 2018, 29 (7): 1084-1093.

³ Andre M. Colman, Natalie Gold, & Briony D. Pulford, “Your Money or Your Life: Comparing judgements in trolley problems economic and emotional harms, injury and death,” *Economics and Philosophy*, 2013, 29: 213-233.

⁴ Jonathan Haidt, Frederick Björklund, & Scott Murphy, “Moral Dumbfounding: When Intuition Finds No Reason,” unpublished manuscript, 2000, University of Virginia.

⁵ Notice that, even in formal models of decision and choices, “options” are exclusive, but are only nominally exhaustive. The solution to a simple formal choice problem will be a line. In a complex problem, it could be an *n*-dimensional vector. Technically, infinitely many things will do equally well. The set is exhaustive in the sense that the choice problem is solved, but not in the sense that the solution points to a small set of acceptable alternatives in any ordinary understanding of “small.”

⁶ For discussion of the point in moral philosophy, see, for example, Philippa Foot, “Moral Dilemmas Revisited,” in *Moral Dilemmas and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2002), pp. 175-188.

scientific research traffics in moral prohibition, but a lot of it does. And the work that does not encourage a reader to consider a morally prohibited act often at least tries to encourage a reader to consider kinds of acts that tend to be bad—like theft or lying.

There are at least three reasons to worry about this aspect of social scientific work on cognitive, affective, or volitional aspects of moral life. First, it is *not* clear that research conducted in these terms *can* help us better understand moral life. Far from demonstrating thoughtful negotiation of complex circumstances where values or dispositions seem to be in tension, readers who stand ready to rob, cheat, steal, murder and lie are normally showing themselves to have bad characters *and* to stand ready to reinforce their bad characters by considering performing *precisely* the kinds of acts that tend to corrupt character. Imagine trying to handle the moral education of a young person by insisting that a person should *give it some thought* before lying, cheating, stealing, or pushing a classmate off a bridge, since, although sometimes these are morally excellent things to do, often they are not. Secondly and relatedly, work structured in this way *cannot* help us understand some crucial aspects of moral life—aspects that belong to traditional thought about practical wisdom/phronesis.

The problematic aspects of some of the dilemmic social scientific research that I have mentioned seem to stem from tendencies that plague efforts to do science about moral life:

- The relevant body of research tends to look to isolated situations rather than broad patterns of inference and motivation that operate across different kinds of circumstances.⁷ It is very difficult to operationalize key aspects of the psychology of moral life *without* a focus on isolated situations. The isolation is what allows for measurement, even if the measure tries to operate cross-situationally by doing “snapshot” checks multiple times in a given period. But moral emotion, disposition, and reasoning all involve kinds of generality that are at best *instantiated* situation-by-situation rather than being fully on view in any one of them.
- Having isolated ethically charged scenarios in order to track how people think or feel about them, and what sort of counsel people might give to anyone finding herself in such challenging circumstances, much of the research implicitly relies upon a presumed exclusive and exhaustive partition of the option space that seems to amount to “do A” or “don’t do A.” Life normally offers indefinitely many responses, any one of which might be good, in ethically difficult circumstances.
- Ethically admirable patterns of inference, motivation, disposition, habit, and conduct are at least as likely to show themselves in the kinds of things that a person *would never even consider* doing as in what they in fact do.

In the moral dilemma with which I began, the scenario seems designed to make it seem reasonable to rob a stranger. The place to look for bad reasoning, however, is back before I made the series of decisions that made it impossible for me get started on my journey early

⁷ For philosophical concerns about a related tendency in work on rationality, see Michael Thompson, “Two Forms of Practical Generality,” in Christopher Morris & Arthur Ripstein, editors, *Practical Rationality and Preference: Essays for David Gauthier*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), pp. 121-152.

enough to give me the time needed to deal with contingent impediments. I did not plan in a way that could allow me to cope with a train delay. I did not arrive at the station early enough to handle a lost mobile and missing wallet. Much dilemmic social scientific research has an unfortunate tendency to work against the normal functioning of moral imagination in coming up with additional options for choice and action, tries to cut the legs off some responses that might have been possible with prudent foresight, *and* seems to be designed to encourage readers to override the kinds of filters and screens that a sane, ethically inclined moral psychological framework makes possible. The practically wise person, for example, will often come up with novel responses in hard situations so as to *avoid* doing the kinds of things that tend to be (or always are) unethical—robbing people, for instance, or lying or committing murder.

The worries I have raised are related to some of the concerns that led Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe to mount serious criticism of the tendency in positive psychology to try to understand virtues as independent signature strengths that could function in isolation from each other. Schwartz and Sharpe advocate a neo-Aristotelian approach to question about virtue. They put the crux of their dispute with the signature strength approach to understanding virtue this way:

1. Virtues and strengths should *not* be treated in isolation from each other; they are not effective, in general, if exercised independently.
2. More of any one of the strengths is not necessarily better; in fact, nurturing a single signature strength can produce *deformations* of character....
3. And finally, without practical wisdom, the other strengths, no matter how well developed they may be, cannot be effectively deployed.⁸

Schwartz and Sharpe offer a case involving a friend modelling her wedding dress for you a few hours before she is to walk down the aisle. The dress is not flattering. She asks you, eagerly, “How do I look?” As Schwartz and Sharpe point out, honesty is crucial in friendship. But, they note, it isn’t clear that your friend *has* another dress to wear, and even if she *has* another dress, there is no guarantee that the other dress will look *better* than the one she is wearing, and it is very important that brides feel good about themselves and have confidence when they walk down the aisle on their wedding day.⁹ Although Sharpe and Schwartz implicitly suggest that your only options are to give your opinion about the dress, or else to lie, an honest friend might respond, “You look beautiful.” This could be true. The radiance of a happy, confident bride *is* beautiful even if her dress is not the one you would choose for her. Not every compliment about someone’s appearance is directed to what the person happens to be wearing, and a self-conscious, unhappy, and anxious bride will not look her best even if she is wearing a perfect dress.

⁸ Barry Schwartz & Kenneth C. Sharpe, “Practical Wisdom: Aristotle Meets Positive Psychology,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 2006, 7: 377-395.

⁹ Schwartz & Sharpe (2006), pp. 378-379.

According to Schwartz and Sharpe, practical wisdom—a master virtue that depends for its effectiveness on an underlying core of virtuous motives and modes of inference—plays several roles in ethical thought, feeling, and conduct. Neo-Aristotelian¹⁰ accounts of practical wisdom treat virtues as integrated; focus on balanced responses in specific situations; and so treat practical wisdom as what orchestrates morally sound patterns of inference, motivation, and emotion into an effective and flourishing life. “Practical wisdom,” Schwartz and Sharpe argue, “is needed to solve the problems of specificity, relevance, and conflict that are pervasive in everyday experience.”¹¹

Picking up on the kinds of concerns raised by Schwartz and Sharpe, work by the Wisdom Task force (the group that provided the best-man-at-the-train-station scenario with which I began) argues that a focus on perspectival aspects of meta-cognition is crucial to understanding practical wisdom. This work helps us to understand how practical wisdom can fill the kinds of roles that many researchers have seen as central to its operation. Wise decision-making, the Wisdom Task Force members argue, requires “meta-comprehension—the ability to reflect on the possible (in)sufficiency of one’s comprehension of an issue—as well as certain meta-cognitive aspects of problem solving.”¹² The relevant meta-cognitive processes allow for greater understanding and balancing of potentially conflicting interests or values in the service of setting goals in the current circumstances, appraising how one is doing as one goes along while leaving space to “step back” and adjust one’s ends or means at various points in practical problem-solving. They describe these aspects of practical wisdom as “perspectival meta-cognition.” Perspectival meta-cognitive processes balance different viewpoints on the situation at hand (with due epistemic humility), allow the agent to adapt to different contexts, and recognize that there is always more than one way to construe the situations in which one finds oneself. It makes it possible for the agent to match moral aspirations to context, culture, and past experience.¹³

Although the principal focus of recent phronesis research at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues been on developing an account of phronesis that will show how phronesis might bridge the gap between a person’s understanding of virtue and reasoning about virtue on the one side, virtuous moral action on the other,¹⁴ the research may help to remedy the kinds of worries I have raised about dilemmic social scientific research and realize the kinds of ambitions articulated by the Wisdom Task Force. Kristjánsson et al. (2020) divide the functions of phronesis into four main areas:

¹⁰ The “neo” signifies work that draws from Aristotle but does not embrace Aristotle’s metaphysics. It is not clear to me that one can understand Aristotle’s ethics without understanding his metaphysics, but that is another matter.

¹¹ Schwartz & Sharpe (2006), p. 383.

¹² Igor Grossmann et al. (*forthcoming*) [mss p. 11].

¹³ Igor Grossmann et al. (*forthcoming*) [mss pp. 11-14].

¹⁴ See Catherine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson, & Panos Paris, “Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis, *Human Development*, 2019, (6): 101-129; Kristján Kristjánsson, Catherine Darnell, Blaine Fowers, Francisco Moller, & David Pollard with Stephen Toma, “Phronesis: Developing Conceptualization and an Instrument: Research Report,” April 2020, University of Birmingham.

1. The Constitutive Function: Phronesis involves the cognitive ability to perceive the ethically salient aspects of a situation and to appreciate these as calling for specific kinds of responses. This ability can be cultivated and should develop into the sort of cognitive excellence that merits the name of “wisdom.” In the Schwartz and Sharpe wedding day scenario, phronesis alerts the agent to the importance of honesty as well as the difficulty faced by a bride who needs her friend’s support and is wearing a dress that does not work especially well under the circumstances. Presumably, a measure of practical wisdom could have prevented the train station scenario from arising in the first place and, failing that, would likely have helped to steer the agent away from acts of theft.
2. The Integrative Function: Phronesis integrates different components of a good life, especially in circumstances where different ethically salient considerations, or different kinds of virtue or different values, appear to be in conflict. In the Sharpe and Schwartz wedding dress scenario, phronesis will help to integrate various concerns about the importance of friendship, the centrality of honesty in friendship, overall life experience involving brides on their wedding day, the importance of celebrating milestones like weddings, with the kind of shame that comes of dishonesty to help find a good option in a hard situation.
3. The Blueprint Function: The integrative work of phronesis operates in conjunction with the agent’s overall sense of the kinds of things that matter in life—the agent’s own ethical identity, her understanding of what it takes if she is to live and act well, and her need to live up to the standards that shape and are shaped by her understanding and experience of what matters in life. In the Sharpe and Schwartz wedding dress scenario, the reader seeks to be a good friend, a good wedding guest, an honest person, and so on. These are aspects of the blueprint function. In the train station case, the reader is alert to the demands of family and the demands of serving as a key member of the wedding party, even though these blueprint considerations were not active early enough to stave off failure.
4. The Emotional Regulative Function: Phronesis both requires and contributes to an agent’s emotional well-being by helping to bring her emotional responses into line with her understanding of the ethically salient aspects of her situation, her judgment, and her sense for what is at stake in the moment. For example, phronesis might show that an agent is having an excessive or deficient emotional response, give her construe of the situation at hand, and then help her adjust accordingly by, e.g., giving herself an inner “talking to” or asking herself questions about why she is so upset (or is not upset at all). In the Schwartz and Sharpe scenario, the agent may have to fend off annoyance at being asked a question she would just as soon not answer. And, whatever sort of emotional turmoil has been churned up in the desperation of our negligent best man at the train station, it is likely not helping find a way of coping that does not involve acts of theft.

It is hard to see how practical wisdom could fulfill *any* of these functions in isolation from the others, notice. Aspects of situations can *only* show themselves as ethically salient in light of the kind of patterns at issue in the integrative function. Neither the background

understanding of the values or virtues or significance of these in human life generally, nor the recognition of these in specific situations, will be action-guiding without the first-personal blueprint function, and without the relevant ties to the regulated emotional life of the practically wise person.

The new conceptualization provides a detailed and articulated treatment of what Valerie Tiberius and Jason Swartwood called the “deep understanding” that seems to be at issue in practical wisdom:

...the kind of understanding that wise people have seems to be an understanding of the practical challenges and choices people face, personal and moral values people have, the ways in which these values affect the choices they make, and the difficulties (whether emotional or intellectual) involved in making choices and solving problems. This includes, but is not limited to, knowledge of oneself (e.g., motivations, emotions, habits, skills, intellectual and physical limitations, and personal and moral values), knowledge of others (what they like and what they are like), general knowledge (often relevant to practical concerns and to understanding what makes life meaningful), and knowledge of the actual and possible differences in people’s values and perspectives. Importantly, a person with deep understanding knows what matters and can make appropriate distinctions and connections between various things that matter in life.¹⁵

By isolating and describing these functions, the Phronesis Project has developed a four-component phronesis construct. According to the new model, phronesis involves Moral Emotion, Moral Identity, Moral Adjudication, and Moral Perception. All four are operative in choice situations. I take it that the four-component construct and the functional analysis provide a moral psychological setting for some aspects of the perspectival meta-cognitive processes at issue in the Wisdom Task Force’s recommendation.

Perspectival meta-cognition is supposed to allow the agent to implement abstract moral concepts in practice, see through some kinds of illusions and potential self-deception, and enable both social cooperation and long-term planning. The relevant processes are grounded in the agent’s moral aspirations and the agent’s context, culture, and experiences. These are the desired fruits of reflection and deliberation, a capacity to shift attention, and an ability to alter one’s construe of one’s circumstances accordingly. The combined grounding in moral aspirations and context, culture and experience take moral psychological form in the functional analysis of phronesis. Beyond this, the four-component model of phronesis is precisely designed to overcome a problem that the need for a perspectival meta-cognitive account of practical wisdom does not immediately address—the need to translate wisdom into action.

¹⁵ Valerie Tiberius & Jason Swartwood, “Wisdom Revisited: A Case Study in Normative Theory,” *Philosophical Explorations*, 2011, 14 (3), pp. 281-282.

The new conceptualization fits the Schwartz and Sharpe wedding dress dilemma well. The friend has lively awareness of the ethically salient aspects of the current situation. The challenge is to respond to the bride's query in a way that fits with the importance of the situation, the value of the friendship, and so on. The reflective aspects of the questions that frame the friend's response fit with *both* the need for perspectival meta-cognition and the functional analysis of phronesis.

Beyond this, the four-component model and functional analysis help to remedy some of the problems I have raised in thinking about moral dilemma-based social scientific research more generally. While researchers attempting to develop an instrument for measuring and tracking they make use of moral dilemmas as a way of *discerning* the work of broad patterns of thought and feeling, motivation and reasoning, as these are brought to bear in specific situations. The Project's embrace of a neo-Aristotelian framework makes this clear:

What Aristotle's remarks about phronesis seem to imply is.... First, there can be no phronesis without some good habits or, as we might put it today, some espousal of moral values and habituation into ways of expressing these, such as a general tendency to be honest, kind, thoughtful, compassionate, and the like, and to see these as one's ends.... Moreover, habituation would mean that one has also developed certain affective patterns of response to objects, recognitions, and appraisals that are, at least for the most part, appropriate. In other words, one's emotions are fitting to their objects.¹⁶

The meta-cognitive constitutive, integrative, and blueprint functions work against any suggestion that the option space in a specific situation will lend itself to a simple exclusive and exhaustive partitioning. The orchestrated operations of these functions leave ample scope for moral imagination in complex situations. While the agent might find herself narrowing her options as she goes, there is no implications that her perception of her situation will wear its option space in its sleeve. There is not even a suggestion that there *could be* an exhaustive partition of the option space in advance. After all, the practically wise person may well come up with an entirely novel way of responding to an ethical challenge.

By a similar token, her existing good habits will tend to filter out some possibilities that are, technically, open to her. The children, say, are running wild in the garden. There is a need to, as one says, help them make better choices. Even if the surroundings offer rocks one could throw at them, large sticks of wood one could use to threaten them or beat them, and so on, *none* of the loose potential weapons lying about in the space present themselves as tools for use in dealing with unruly children. The agent's good character shows itself in such things as avoiding resorting to violence in an effort to subdue exuberant children—in never so much as *considering* taking violent means to the end of quieting them, no matter how frustrating one finds their antics.

¹⁶ Kristjánsson et al., 2020, p. 11.

In short, in addition to promising to bridge the knowledge-action gap, the new conceptualization promises to address some serious deficiencies in existing research.

At this writing, the Phronesis Project research team has begun work developing an instrument to measure phronesis in light of the new theoretical model. Surveying the fruits of the work so far, Igor Grossman writes:

Though further work is needed to comprehensively evaluate the nuances of the assessment instrument, the initial results are promising in terms of the data fit to the theoretical model and the predicted outcome-related markers.

Through this fundamental effort, research on practical wisdom has moved one step closer toward having a scientific understanding of the ‘gappiness problem’ and identifying a valid measure of practical wisdom.¹⁷

¹⁷ Kristjánsson et al., 2020, p. 4.



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