

Phronesis and the Integration of the Virtues

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Abstract

This paper makes the provocative suggestion that *φρόνησις* (*phronesis*) is not the sole adjudicator and guide of virtues. Whilst *phronesis* often does direct courses of moral action, particularly where virtues conflict with other another, it is not entirely indispensable in this role.

It will be argued that the focus on the virtue of practical wisdom as the 'master virtue' has resulted in an over-emphasis on explicit and intellectual processes in moral thinking. Wisdom is cast in the role of the conductor of an orchestra of virtues. The conductor stands apart from the orchestra and tells the different sections of the orchestra when to come in and how loudly to play. The conductor is indeed part of the orchestra but she also stands apart from it. In much the same way, *phronesis* is taken to be 'of ' the virtues, but to stand somewhat outside of them as well - at least on an Aristotelian reading.

One does not *need* a conductor to produce harmonious music. This may be especially so where a group of musicians have played a piece of music many times before and know what works best for all the musicians involved. To unpack the metaphor, one might have faced a moral problem in the past and as a result, know which of the virtues to deploy to meet it. We might know that we need more bass (cello) and less treble (violin), or whether perhaps a 'solo' is called for. We don't need a 'conductor' to tell us how to play this piece together – at least not explicitly. It is possible that experience has taught us to 'internalise the conductor', or simply that the process has in some respects, become less explicit and more automatic.

It seems to me that there are three interpretations of the role of *phronesis* in guiding the moral virtues: 1. *phronesis* as *necessarily* consciously invoked and drawn upon in every moral dilemma (the 'conductor' model); 2. *phronesis* as implicitly or automatically involved in moral dilemmas that echo previous moral situations (the 'internalised conductor' model) and 3. *phronesis* is not invoked (consciously or otherwise) in *every single* moral dilemma we face and for which we find a harmonious solution (the 'jam session' model). Where we face a novel moral dilemma we may improvise and do without a conductor altogether - the music we produce is a kind of 'emergent property' that results from moral virtues being

repeatedly deployed in concert with one another, finding their harmonious solutions without conscious direction and possibly with other virtues, such as love, fulfilling the leading integrative role.

1. The Concept of *Phronesis*

Phronesis can be translated as ‘good moral sense’, ‘practical wisdom’ or ‘practical moral wisdom’. It has long been a central concept in philosophy, and especially in Aristotelian virtue ethics, though it has become increasingly popular in psychology and in applied contexts like business ethics and medical ethics. According to Aristotle, *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue which guides the moral virtues. Presently, we will examine the manner in which *phronesis* is said to direct other virtues.

However, before doing so, it should be acknowledged that this understanding of *phronesis*, in effect, accords the intellect paramount importance in the moral life, for it is the intellectual, *rational* part of the human person that presides over the other virtues, including moral virtues. Whilst clearly an important part of the moral life, it is far from self-evident that the intellect really does trump other virtues; we are often inspired by stories in which an individual has acted with great love or courage ‘unthinkingly’, seemingly unmediated by any intellectual or rational assessment of the situation.¹ Thus, before examining the concept of *phronesis* in more depth it is important to bear its status as an *intellectual* virtue in mind, for it is easy to lose sight of the fact that this inevitably gets our discussion off on a decidedly rational foot. It is important always to examine the fundamental bedrock of our suppositions since they determine the substructure of our thinking.

The intellectual virtue of practical wisdom both latches itself onto other virtues, so that each of the virtues is infused by *phronesis* (what one might call the constitutive function of *phronesis*), in addition to mediating *between* these virtues, standing somewhat apart from them (the integrative function of *phronesis*). A full explanation of these two functions is

¹ The Aristotelian explanation of this is that similar-enough decisions we have consciously taken in the past come to solidify into automatic reflexes over time. Jonathan Haidt disputes this; in his view such decisions are always taken *instinctively* i.e. without such rational mediation.

introduced by Kristjansson (2014). The constitutive function of *phronesis* is exemplified by Dan Russell's contention that *phronesis* makes indeterminate goals (e.g. be generous) more clear. If we want to show generosity, but we are not sure what 'helping' looks like in a particular case, practical wisdom permeates generosity to inform our thinking and acting. *Phronesis* therefore partially constitutes the virtue of generosity. Russell describes the integrative function of *phronesis* as its core task in assessing the relative weight of competing values or virtues with respect to *eudaimonia* (the ultimate good and unconditional end of human beings). The classic example used to illustrate the integrative function of practical wisdom is the experience of conflicts not between virtues and vices, but between two (or more) virtues, for instance being honest and being kind. By means of its adjudicating role in weighing the virtues *phronesis* therefore helps us to act virtuously 'in an overall way' (Russell, 2014).

A few observations can be made about the content of the preceding paragraph. First, *phronesis* is clearly not like other virtues insofar as it has a dual mode of operation (constitutive and integrative) whereas most other virtues (at least on Aristotle's understanding, do not). Secondly, and following on from the first observation, *phronesis* is construed as the 'master' arbitrating virtue within this scheme. Thirdly, *phronesis* is deployed in a conscious and deliberate way; it 'assesses' the weight of competing values and does not apparently operate in an intuitive or instinctive way. Yet it seems unlikely that we would always need to call on this judge in *every* moral circumstance we encounter.²

At the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues we have taken a similar line to Russell regarding the importance of *phronesis* within the applied context of character education in schools;

'Among the intellectual virtues one deserves a special mention here. That is the virtue which the ancient Greeks called *phronesis*, but can also be called 'good sense' – the overall quality of knowing what to want and what not to want when the demands of two or more virtues collide, and to integrate such demands into

² This point is acknowledged by Aristotle himself insofar as he recognised the need for *phronesis* in the solidifying process of establishing enduring traits of character (*hexeis*), but not so much in adulthood when these patterns have crystallised, except when we meet with completely new situations.

an acceptable course of action. Living with good sense entails: considered deliberation, well founded judgement and the vigorous enactment of decisions' (p. 3, *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, Arthur, 2013).

The integrative function of *phronesis* and its deliberative and 'refereeing' character are both referenced in the above quotation, whilst the constitutive function of *phronesis* is referred to later in the same paper; "Good sense' forms part of all the other virtues; indeed it constitutes the overarching meta-virtue necessary for good character (Arthur, 2013, pp. 3-4). Identifying *phronesis* as a 'meta-virtue' echoes my earlier point that *phronesis* occupies something of an elevated position with regard to other virtues.

A number of questions present themselves on the back of this characterisation of *phronesis*. First, what does the prefix 'meta' mean in the context of identifying practical wisdom as a 'meta-virtue'? Secondly, do we need to postulate this particular 'meta-virtue' as central to good character? Thirdly, could any other virtue be a 'meta-virtue' (similar to yet different from other virtues in important respects)?³ For instance, might the virtue of love attach itself to each of the virtues in a constitutive way, infusing all the virtues with love whilst simultaneously standing outside of the other virtues to preside over the most lovingly virtuous courses of action?

With regard to the first question, the prefix 'meta' derives from the Greek preposition μετά which means 'after' or 'beyond'. It has become increasingly popular as an English prefix to indicate a concept which is an abstraction from another concept. For example, in psychology 'meta-cognition' describes thinking about human thought processes, while a 'meta-analysis' is an analysis of an analysis (that examines a number of existing assessments).

To characterise *phronesis* as a 'meta-virtue' would mark it out as a 'virtue about the virtues'. *Phronesis* certainly seems to have this status within Aristotle's virtue ethics and, addressing the second question above, practical wisdom is *necessary* to enacting good character within an Aristotelian approach. However, if we were to take a different virtue as the overarching 'meta-virtue', as Thomas Aquinas does with ἀγάπη (*agapé*, love, benevolence), practical

³ Aristotle posited a meta-virtue among the moral virtues (*megalopsychia*) which intensifies the other virtues and 'makes them greater.'

wisdom would still be an important virtue, though it would not take centre stage as it does for Aristotle. Moreover, the constitutive and integrative function of Aristotelian *phronesis* would be fulfilled by *agape*, which would both infuse other virtues constitutively (see Pinsent, 2012) and move *between* the virtues in integrating mode. We return to this suggestion in Section 3.

Staying with the thesis that *phronesis* does constitute the overarching meta-virtue necessary for good character, philosophers have been joined in recent years by psychologists advocating the importance of practical wisdom in our moral life. Perhaps one of the reasons for the rise of the concept of *phronesis* within psychology is that positive psychology has reawakened interest in strengths and virtues, though it has failed to provide an account of how these strengths and virtues are integrated (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006; Kristjansson, 2014), thereby paving the way for the organising principle of practical wisdom.

Barry Schwartz is perhaps the best known supporter of *phronesis* within psychology. He and his co-author Kenneth Sharpe (2006; 2011) contend that practical wisdom is the ‘master virtue’ essential to solving problems of conflict that emerge when character strengths are translated into action in concrete situations. They thus weave an Aristotelian approach into psychology, calling for social institutions to stimulate the development and use of practical wisdom rather than inhibiting it by means of rules and incentives (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2011).

Other psychologists have been vocal in their support of the concept of practical wisdom as virtue ethics has become more prominent in moral psychology in recent decades. Blaine Fowers identifies *phronesis* as ‘the capacity to make wise decisions regarding which virtues are called for in particular circumstances and the best way to enact those virtues’ (Fowers, 2003, p. 415). This suggests that *phronesis* is a conscious activity; the moral agent makes wise *decisions* regarding which virtues to deploy in meeting a given situation.

However, in a fully Aristotelian vein, Fowers notes a degree of attunement that comes with moral perception (seeing the need to act) that suggests that at least some elements of *phronesis* are – or become - more automatic: ‘...practical reasoning requires us to consider how best to act in order to pursue the goods we seek. Such decision making is not limited to the emergence of an occasional ‘ethical issue’. Rather, deliberation about how best to act is part of the warp and woof of everyday life. We are continually deciding how best to pursue

our aims, although ordinary daily choices generally occur rather automatically unless we face some unusual or difficult circumstance' (Fowers, 2003, p. 417). This is a hugely important – and thoroughly Aristotelian point, for it posits that some elements of *phronesis* could be internalised whilst the faculty of practical wisdom needs to be explicitly invoked in other situations; 'Our moral perception often will result in a clear and immediate response from us, and we do not have to ponder about the appropriate course of action. In many circumstances, however, the most fitting response is not so obvious and requires deliberation' (Fowers, 2003, p. 419).

Thus there is a clear sense in this paper that *phronesis* straddles implicit (or habituated) *and* explicit domains in both our personal and professional lives. Whether we engage in long and careful consideration, weighing up different courses of action seems to depend to a great deal on the novelty of the situation encountered. It seems plausible to suggest that a person could have a highly internalised 'general' *phronesis* guiding their personal life, but a more 'particular' deliberative *phronesis* in their professional life, that gradually become more routine with experience. Fowers' focus in this paper is the practical wisdom required to be a therapist, though his comments could apply equally to any number of professions. The question to arise from this is whether *phronesis* is a unitary phenomenon, or whether sub-species of *phronesis* exist. In this connection, witness the different conceptions of *phronesis* in medical ethics alone (Beresford, 1996; Hutson & Myers, 1999; Tyreman, 2000, and Kaldjian, 2010).

One further, final observation here is the difference between reasoning and rationalisation. It is quite possible that people make rapid, largely immediate and intuitive reactions to moral problems but that they rehash their experience of the episode later with more elaborate post-hoc rationalisations for their choices. While the difference between reasoning and rationalisation is something which psychologist Jonathan Haidt has been emphasising recently (see Haidt, 2001; 2012), the distinction is at least as old as Ernest Jones, who introduced the term into psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century. Thus it ought to be borne in mind that a person's claim that their *reasons* for acting in a certain way were guided by *phronesis* might be constructions after the fact. This is not to say that individuals are intentionally dishonest. It is notoriously difficult to separate reason from

rationalisation and it is possible that we may use the idea of *phronesis* as an explanatory factor in decisions where we did not, in fact, consciously invoke practical wisdom.

In this first section we have examined the ‘classic’ Aristotelian understanding of practical wisdom as an overarching intellectual ‘meta-virtue’ which guides the other virtues, including moral virtues. As such, *phronesis* is taken to be the ‘master’ arbitrating virtue, and we have seen how this position has been advocated by both philosophers and psychologists. We have suggested that despite the emphasis placed on the arbitrating elements of *phronesis* (encapsulated in the abstract with the metaphor of a ‘conductor’ of virtues) *phronesis* could become habituated or routinized by exposure to familiar situations – a position commensurate with Aristotle’s own understanding that most moral decisions are taken habitually rather than through an explicit process of reflection. In some cases we may reconstruct our decisions as having invoked *phronesis* after the fact, or we may allow that an ‘internalised *phronesis*’ operates subconsciously or implicitly. Indeed only a hardline, radical intellectualist could take the view that *phronesis* necessarily involves only conscious deliberation; from the very beginning, Aristotle allowed for practical wisdom to operate subconsciously or ‘implicitly’. However, in acknowledging that *phronesis* can operate in this subconscious way, we might have reason to think that the concept is expendable altogether and be tempted to do away with the idea of *phronesis* completely (see Section 2, below).

We have also raised the possibility that another virtue might fulfil the role of ‘meta-virtue’, filling the shoes of *phronesis*. In this connection, it was suggested that *agape* (spiritual love or benevolence) which could both infuse other virtues constitutively and move *between* the virtues integratively, could accomplish this function.

2. Multiplying Entities Beyond Necessity: Taking Occam’s Razor to *Phronesis*

In the foregoing it has been suggested that casting practical wisdom as ‘master virtue’ over-emphasizes both explicit and intellectual processes in moral thinking. On this understanding, *phronesis* conducts the virtue ‘orchestra’ directing their complex dynamics. We have proposed, however that we perhaps might not *need* a conductor to produce harmonious music; we might have faced a moral problem in the past and know, as a result, which virtues

are needed to meet it. The idea that we may come to ‘internalise the conductor’ offers the middle ground between a theoretically strong view of explicit *phronesis* (which in practice few would take) and a thoroughgoing rejection of *phronesis* in any guise whatsoever.

However, if courses of moral action can be taken *without* conscious deliberation and with some level of automaticity - some might say by *intuition*- then we do not *need* to envisage a ‘manager’ of our virtuous thinking, feeling and acting. To imagine that we need such an arbiter would be ‘postulating entities beyond necessity’. Is it not possible that where novel moral dilemmas are faced we improvise and do without a conductor completely? The ensuing ‘moral music’ would emerge from virtues being drawn on over and over again in facing different challenges. I call this the ‘mutual interpenetration’ model of *phronesis* (see Section 4). The ‘internalised *phronesis*’ model, in contrast, presupposes the erstwhile presence of a conductor which is effectively a shadow of a concept we perhaps no longer *necessarily* need.

We may meet similar moral situations slightly differently each time they come up in our lives; for instance, the customary dilemma that pits whether to tell someone the truth (when asked) about their new hairdo or dress (honesty), or lie about our true feelings to protect their feelings (kindness). In this dilemma, *phronesis* is said to come into play to adjudicate what is the right thing to do for *this person* (are they sensitive?), *at this point in time* (are they running late with no opportunity to get changed?) Practical wisdom is thought to assimilate the available information and come up with a tailored solution to the problem, integrating all the information at hand.

How do we *know*, however, that there is ever any real deliberation when facing this problem? Might we just rationalise after the fact that sort of reflection was involved? The chances are that someone who invites us to comment on their appearance is well-known to us, though it is conceivable that we might be asked this question by a stranger (though perhaps in that case they would have less reason to expect anything other than a candid answer). Thus it seems likely that we would rarely need to invoke *phronesis* of the sort that is depicted in this case, as we would know intuitively what the right thing to do would be. We may only need to invoke *phronesis* when we face really taxing moral dilemmas.

There may be some particularly challenging situations where we *do* need to engage in careful consideration, actively weighing up different courses of action. However, we could perhaps go almost our whole lives without drawing on it. The kinds of scenario presented in moral dilemmas are often good examples of the challenging situations which might give rise to our postulating the existence of *phronesis* (or something similar):

‘In 1842⁴, a ship struck an iceberg and more than thirty survivors were crowded into a lifeboat intended to hold seven. As a storm threatened, it became obvious that the lifeboat would have to be lightened if anyone were to survive. The captain reasoned that the right thing to do in this situation was to force some individuals to go over the side and drown. Such an action, he reasoned, was not unjust to those thrown overboard, for they would have drowned anyway. If he did nothing, however, he would be responsible for the deaths of those whom he could have saved. Some people opposed the captain's decision. They claimed that if nothing were done and everyone died as a result, no one would be responsible for these deaths. On the other hand, if the captain attempted to save some, he could do so only by killing others and their deaths would be his responsibility; this would be worse than doing nothing and letting all die. The captain rejected this reasoning. Since the only possibility for rescue required great efforts of rowing, the captain decided that the weakest would have to be sacrificed. In this situation it would be absurd, he thought, to decide by drawing lots who should be thrown overboard. As it turned out, after days of hard rowing, the survivors were rescued and the captain was tried for his action.’ (cited in Grassian, 1992)

It could be argued that using dilemmas like the famous example above actually bias us towards believing in something like *phronesis*. But not *all* moral predicaments are quite so complicated; just because we might draw explicitly on practical wisdom in some special borderline cases does not mean we invoke *phronesis* (explicitly or implicitly) consistently or

⁴1841 according to some sources.

continually. In a similar way, just because the Aristotelian doctrine of the ‘Golden Mean’ applies to *some* virtues does not mean to say it applies to *all* virtues. It makes sense to refer to the idea of a medial state between an extreme of excess and an extreme of deficiency in many cases, but it simply doesn’t fit for all virtues, as the particularly thorny virtue of courage attests:

‘I contend that much of the reason that Aristotle’s virtue ethics has proved so durable and dominant is that Aristotle communicates a synthetic picture of a virtue that is familiar from everyday life. Most people have experienced habituation to certain kinds of activities, such as the quantity and quality of food that they consume each day. Therefore they have no serious difficulty in reading Aristotle’s descriptions of temperance and understanding what he means. Such is the power of metaphoric thinking, even when imperfect, that this understanding of temperance is then transferred to other virtues even in problematic cases. It is not easy, for example, to understand how exactly one becomes courageous through habituation’ (Pinsent, 2012, p. 29).

Thus a *thoroughly* Aristotelian approach constrains the way we think about virtue ethics. It privileges the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* over other virtues, and it conceives of virtues as medial states between two extremes of excess and deficiency. Such a ‘rational mean’ may not apply to a great many virtues or vices (see Pinsent’s paper ‘Avarice and Liberality’ for the forthcoming Jubilee Centre volume ‘Varieties of Virtue Ethics’). While this is not the main concern of *this* paper it highlights some problems of Aristotelian virtue ethics, particularly the primacy of the human reason and intellection within this approach.

3. *Phronesis and Agape as Master Virtues*

Over the course of this paper we have scaled back the contribution *phronesis* makes with regard to integrating the virtues. We first dispensed with a strong theoretical position that *phronesis* fulfils a special and explicit integrative role among virtues. We then presented the Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian middle-ground, suggesting that practical wisdom might

become internalised over time, so that it is perhaps implicitly rather than explicitly invoked in our moral lives but still occupies a unique place as a 'meta-virtue'. In this sense, practical wisdom latches itself onto other virtues (the constitutive function of *phronesis*) in addition to mediating *between* these virtues (its integrative function).

It was then suggested that if the human person is capable of acting with some level of automaticity, then we do not *need* to envisage the conductor of the virtue orchestra that is *phronesis*. Moreover, this would be 'postulating entities beyond necessity'. In this section we suggest that a different virtue could serve as the 'master virtue' (the virtue of love between persons). A more radical alternative is then entertained that resists the notion that any *one* virtue is uniquely identifiable as a meta-virtue that infuses and pervades the others. Instead, the virtues mutually interpenetrate each other such that no single virtue fulfils this overarching role. In this case, we extemporise and dispense with the conductor – what I refer to as the 'jazz model'.

With regard to the first suggestion, St Augustine takes the view that the fourfold division of virtue (temperance, fortitude, justice and prudence) is taken from four forms of love, thereby establishing love as the 'master' virtue (ultimately the *only* virtue) over wisdom (*prudentia* the Latin rendering of *phronesis*) and the other three cardinal virtues. Obviously, St Augustine took this love to be specifically the love of God:

'As to virtue leading us to a happy life, I hold virtue to be nothing else than perfect love of God. For the fourfold division of virtue I regard as taken from four forms of love ...temperance is love giving itself entirely to that which is loved; fortitude is love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object; justice is love serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly; prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it.'

(St Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, Chapter 15:25)

Though Augustine inevitably sees love in terms of love *of God*, there are analogues of divine love in secular contexts and the suggestion that love, compassion or benevolence could serve as 'master virtue' could be taken from outside an explicitly religious frame of

reference. Naturally Fr Andrew Pinsent's (2012) Thomist account envisages the virtues as unified not by *prudentia* but by love (agape). In this book, Pinsent revisits the customary position that Thomist ethics is a variation on Aristotelian ethics, attempting not only a revision of this inaccurate reading of Aquinas, but also a 'Copernican revolution in the understanding of virtues in general - a shift in the locus of explanation from the first-person to the second-person perspective' (p. xiv).

Put (over)simplly, Pinsent argues that virtue is acquired not *solely* through an individual's agency and effort, but that virtues are established *in relation to* other agents, with transformation occurring by means of 'gifts' as well as virtues. Pinsent draws on contemporary analyses of 'second-person relatedness' in social science to illuminate that the 'I-thou' relationship (see Buber, 1983) is the crucible in which virtue is formed. From a theistic perspective this is the *loving* relationship of the individual to God, though the secular analogue of this is the 'I-thou' of one person to another, primarily in the infant's *loving* relation to their primary caregiver. Our growth in the virtues derives from a loving relationship to another person who potentiates and nurtures such growth by means of endowments which strengthen our own abilities.

Within the second-person approach, the human person is moved to progress in virtue not *exclusively* by their own reason (as Aristotle would have it), but also by God's grace or by the benevolence of significant people in our lives. It may help to illuminate this with an example from my PhD, long before I read Pinsent's book, where I took the view that virtue (the virtue in question here is hope), is far from a private, interior resource, but grows from and is sustained in loving communion with other people:

Kobler and Stotland's (1964) study of a suicide epidemic in an American psychiatric hospital in the 1960s demonstrated that expectations of significant others in the therapeutic environment were crucial to whether a patient was able to discern a way out of distress or interpreted their situation as hopeless, leading to their eventual suicide. Whether important people in the troubled individual's world expected the worst, if they themselves had lost hope in recovery, was vital in determining whether suicide occurred... In conveying suicidal plans, the troubled person attempts

to gain assurances from others that hope still exists but when this meets a response of hopelessness and helplessness there seems to be but one way out; ‘...suicide occurred in each case when, and only when, all significant and hopeful relationships were broken. The patient, after communicating, searching and testing for hope, then felt he was alone in an empty world’ (Gulliford, 2011, pp. 171-2, citing Kobler & Stotland, 1964, p. 260)

Hope is far from an individual and intrapersonal phenomenon. Lynch (1974), writing from a psychoanalytic perspective (and – incidentally – also a Roman Catholic priest), criticises the privatized view of hope as being profoundly ‘Pelagian’ in its implicit affirmation that an individual’s personal resources are sufficient in themselves to sustain hope. Lynch attributes the pervasiveness of such a view to embarrassment and even shame about recognising dependence on others. It is perhaps worth noting here, that we may impute this kind of concern about dependency to Aristotle for he did not esteem gratitude as a virtue commensurate with the *megalopsychoi* (his paragons of moral virtue).

Thus benevolent love or compassion (we could call it agape) can be the master, unifying virtue. It is a kind of love (rather than prudence) which kindles hope *by means of* the second person relationship. Ironically, the practical wisdom (‘prudence’) shown by practitioners in the situation described by Kobler and Stotland, actually served to promote suicidal thinking on the part of patients. A survivor spoke of how orderlies had removed his glasses and shoelaces, actions that perplexed him; ‘I said what in hell can I possibly do with shoelaces; and then I start thinking- and I never did come up with anything you could do with shoelaces, but I guess there is something you can do with shoelaces. She got me to thinking about it’ (Kobler & Stotland, 1964, p. 83)

Perceiving virtues to be forged in communion with other persons acknowledges the truth that the modern obsession with ‘self-help’ and the age-old reliance on reason have their limits:

‘Hope not only imagines; it *imagines with*. We are so habituated to conceiving of the imagination as a private act of the human spirit that we now find it impossible to conceive of a common act of *imagining with*. But

what happens in despair is that the private imagination, of which we are so enamoured, reaches the point of the end of inward resource and must put on the imagination of another if it is to find a way out. This it must do, or it is lost... two imaginations, that of the patient and the doctor, work together to discover and enlarge the possibilities of a situation' (Lynch, 1974, p. 23-4).

Pinsent's Thomist account (2012) opens up understanding of virtues as developing *between* persons, interpersonally as opposed to *intrapersonally*. One of the advantages of locating the virtues in the cradle of the I-Thou relationship is that it perhaps makes sense of how we acquire virtues from birth, a period about which Aristotle was at worst disinterested and at best decidedly sketchy;

'...his [Aquinas'] work may also highlight the effects of everyday joint attention on the development of virtues in relation to others. In particular, he may help to highlight the way in which commonplace instances of joint attention, such as that between a parent and child, help to shape the formation of virtues in ways that are often overlooked.' (Pinsent, 2012, pp. 105-6)

4. Interpenetrating Harmonies: The Jazz Model

The final coda to this paper offers the suggestion that the special role of *either* practical wisdom or benevolence as conductors of the 'virtue orchestra' could be in jeopardy on the interpenetrative, 'jazz' model. This model holds that the virtues mutually interpenetrate each other such that no *single* virtue fulfils an overarching role over the others, avoiding the subordinationism of virtues - usually to *phronesis*, but conceivably to other virtues, such as compassion or love.

It will be recalled that earlier in this paper we encountered Russell's understanding of the constitutive function of *phronesis*. If we want to show generosity, but we are not sure what 'helping' would be in a particular case, practical wisdom *permeates* the virtue of generosity

to guide our thinking and acting in generous ways.⁵ However, this highlights only the permeability of *phronesis* (as a special case) whereas, the suggestion I am making in this paper is that there is complete permeation of *all* the virtues by the others. *Phronesis* is not, therefore, a unique bond that links the virtues, because all virtues require the virtue of practical wisdom (NE 6.13, 1145a1–2). Rather, all the virtues bond with *each other*. This presupposes a strong ‘unity of the virtues’ thesis, while acknowledging that the virtues are distinct in themselves.

In contrast, the strong thesis of the unity of the virtues put forward by Socrates collapses the virtues into one. He taught that ‘virtue is one’ (*Protagoras* 329d), apparently taking the view that there is literally only one virtue which goes by different names - ‘courage,’ ‘wisdom,’ ‘justice’ etc. The individual virtues are not separable, because justice is pious and piety is just, and courage is wise and wisdom is courageous, and so on and so forth (see Penner, 1973). While a string position is taken on the unity of the virtues here, Socrates emphasised the unity of virtue at the expense of their individual manifestations – something the interpenetrative ‘jazz’ model avoids.

The idea for the ‘mutual interpenetration’ model has its roots in the understanding of the relations between the persons of the Trinity in Christian theology. The doctrine of the trinity, first formulated at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, and revisited at the First Council of Constantinople (381), asserts there is only one God and that God exists eternally in three persons (hypostaseis). Each of these persons (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) is fully God such that all of the persons are equal in essence (homoousios) with other another. Therefore, crucially, none of the persons of the Trinity are subordinate to any of the other persons.

⁵ Permeation (by wisdom) of other virtues is presupposed in a recent empirical paper by Westrate, Ferrari, and Ardelit (2016), who show that laypeople from the USA and Canada conceive of wisdom in three broad prototypes; the practical prototype, the philosophical prototype and the benevolent prototype. These prototypes reflect rational v. emotional and pragmatic v. transcendent dimensions. This empirical paper shows how different ‘species’ of wisdom reflect their penetration by other virtues; the benevolent prototype of wisdom combines elements of wisdom with elements of compassion. For instance, both experts and lay people consistently report that compassion and related qualities (e.g. empathy, concern for the greater good, altruism) are essential characteristics of wisdom (Ardelt, 2003; Gluck et al. 2005).

The doctrine was formulated under pressure, primarily from a heresy known as Arianism, which held that Jesus the Son was not fully divine, and had been created (and was therefore not eternal). This attempt to preserve the belief in monotheism came at a cost (denying the divinity of the Son and subordinating the persons of the Trinity). An allied heresy known as subordinationism asserts that God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are *essentially* subordinate to God the Father. Against this background, the early church councils worked to formulate what is for many the ultimate symbol of unity-in-plurality; the Trinitarian formulation. Whether or not one believes oneself in God (Trinitarian or otherwise), the model of unity-in-plurality embodied in the Trinitarian doctrine can serve as an analogy of how closely virtues are unified, while simultaneously recognising the *distinctive* qualities of individual virtues.

The eighth century Syrian monk and priest, John of Damascus, spoke of the mutual permeation of the persons of the Godhead, from which I draw in proposing the 'mutual interpenetration' model of the virtues:

'Such is the fellowship in the Godhead that the Father and the Son not only embrace each other, but they also enter into each other, permeate each other, and dwell in each other. One in being, they are also always one in the intimacy of their friendship.'

The mutual interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity was later encapsulated by the notion of *perichoresis* (περιχώρησις), a Greek word that can also be rendered co-indwelling and co-inhering in English. Writing about *perichoresis*, McGrath (2001, p.325) writes that it 'allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of a 'community of being' in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them'.

The Trinitarian idea of mutual-interpenetration, expressed by the concept of *perichoresis* can be used as an analogy for understanding how virtues act in a unified way, though inter-dependently, to produce harmonious resolutions to the ethical challenges humans face. This is not just an occasional 'latching on' of virtues to each other (or more particularly to the so-called meta-virtue of practical wisdom), but rather a collective permeation of the virtues,

where no virtue is routinely subordinated to others - like a jazz band producing its harmonies without a conductor.

In this paper I have questioned whether *phronesis* is quite as central to our moral lives as many have supposed. I started out with the thesis that practical wisdom occupies a special place within the virtues that constitute the good life. I then suggested that *phronesis* might not be invoked *explicitly* in every moral dilemma we face; a transition towards an 'internalised practical wisdom'. Having proposed this variation to the original thesis, I then scaled back the scope of *phronesis* still further, arguing against the idea of *phronesis* as a special, master or meta-virtue, suggesting this role could (and *has been*) fulfilled by other virtues, such as *agape* (by means of second-person relatedness - the 'I-Thou' relationship). Such an approach could be justly accused of subordinating virtues, insofar as there is still one master virtue presiding over all the others.⁶

In response, I entertained the idea that the virtues mutually interpenetrate one another, avoiding subordinating virtues to one another and allowing moral decisions to come about by improvisation – the 'jazz model' rather than by means of an arbitrating conductor (*phronesis*).⁷ Thus, the end of our exploring brings us back to where we started; a restatement of the thesis of the 'unity of the virtues' - unified not by the constitutive and integrative functions of *phronesis*, but by the mutual interpenetration of all virtues.

⁶ Note that this is an orthodox Christian view: μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη (1 Corinthians 13:13). My purpose is to point out not that 'subordinationism' is itself wrong, but that there are alternatives to prioritizing *phronesis* as master virtue, and to offer an alternative perspective as to how the virtues might co-relate. While I used the Trinity as a model, it was for analogical purposes only and does not require Christian belief.

⁷ It should be emphasised that I use the 'jazz' metaphor in a different way from Barry Schwartz. He talks about *phronesis itself* being like jazz, insofar as practical wisdom improvises to find solutions to problems that improve on a rigid rule-based approach. In contrast, I envisage the 'jazz' as an emergent property of human virtues acting together to produce harmonious resolutions to the ethical challenges humans face.

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