



THE
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Insight Series

***Phronesis (Practical Wisdom) as a Key to
Moral Decision-Making:
Comparing Two Models***

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Introduction

How do we best arrive at decisions to act in situations in which there is a conflict between our moral values (such as equality versus freedom) or even between deeply ingrained moral virtues (such as honesty versus compassion)? Most virtue theories have an answer in the form of so-called ‘cardinal moral virtues’ that trump other virtues, or even a single ‘master virtue’ that calls the shots if there is a conflict, such as *justice* in Plato’s system or *neighbourly love* in Christianity. Yet there are also systems of virtue that do away with any arbitrator of this kind and simply suppose that developing one virtue will automatically spill over into and inform other virtues, such as in the positive psychological system of six virtues and 24 character strengths where the ‘chain’ of virtues is considered to be as strong as its strongest links (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

In Aristotle’s virtue theory, there is (famously) no master moral virtue and not even any cardinal virtues. However, instead Aristotle posits an intellectual meta-virtue called *phronesis* (practical wisdom) that deliberates upon and mediates conflicts between virtues, like a conductor harmonises the overall sound of a symphony orchestra, and even attaches itself to each individual virtue to help with its proper exhibition in tricky situations. That said, Aristotle does not offer a detailed account of the nature or functions of *phronesis*, and he says even less of any practical worth about its development and education, simply remarking that it is cultivated through ‘teaching and experience’ (Aristotle, 1985: 33 [1103a14–16]) – but we are not told what kind of teaching, what sort of experience.

For reasons that we briefly canvass below, *phronesis* has become a hot topic of late, especially within the field of professional ethics, where adult agents often face dilemmatic situations, in professions such as teaching, nursing, business, medicine, and policing. In default of any consensual and systematic account of the workings of *phronesis*, various non-Aristotelian accounts of *phronesis* have proliferated, many of which are suspect in terms of theoretical grounding, such as postmodern conceptions of *phronesis* as some sort of mysterious intuitive artistry (e.g., Kemmis, 2012), or a MacIntyrean conception of *phronesis* as an experiential skill developed within certain highly discrete and disparate – and possibly socially relative – ‘practices’ of human endeavours (MacIntyre, 1981).

Dissatisfied with the current state of play, a number of contemporary philosophers, psychologists, and educationists have tried to develop more theoretically robust conceptions of *phronesis*, understood as excellence in moral decision-making. Some of those academics rely on what is known as the ‘standard Aristotelian model’ – however under-developed by Aristotle himself – and try to flesh it out with sufficient specificity to make sense, both with regard to Aristotle’s own virtue ethics and current received wisdoms in moral psychology. Another group of academics think that the trust in Aristotle may be misplaced and that we had better depart from him in a substantial way, turning our attention rather to a more unified rational model of moral decision-making understood as general ethical expertise, harking back *inter alia* to Aristotle’s predecessors, Socrates and Plato.

The Historical Backdrop

It is not a coincidence that *phronesis* is a construct in retrieval at the present historical juncture. The consequences of the current divisive cultural and political ethos in the Western world have turned out to be extensive and debilitating, and indeed inflammatory in the way people discuss hot topics of the day. The worldwide pandemic that broke out in 2020 helped crystallise many of those developments. As well as bringing existing polarisations into sharper relief, it created new ones, such as the one between public health and economic prosperity – dividing people both along and across traditional conflict lines. The socio-moral and economic reverberations of the pandemic led to a proliferation of debates in public media that closely connect – albeit in new and unforeseeable ways – to proverbial debates about the virtues and possible trade-offs between them.

The perennial importance of good deliberation in dilemmatic situations clarifies why *phronesis* has historically attracted attention. However, this interest gradually faded in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theorising, with *phronesis* being brushed off as both too moralistic and indeterminate as a decision procedure, and indeed as part of a naïve ‘bag-of-virtues’ conception of moral life (Kohlberg, 1981). The decline of interest in *phronesis* developed in tandem with the erosion of virtue ethics as a paradigm in moral philosophy (MacIntyre, 1981) and the replacement of ‘character’ with a conception of human ‘personality’ as ‘character devaluated’ in psychology (Allport, 1937). *Phronesis*, with its emphasis on making wise moral decisions based on the specifics of a context, cannot be formulated via the kind of algorithmic principle-based decision-making typically favoured by Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought.

As a decision process, *phronesis* thus became replaced in the 19th and 20th centuries by top-down procedures that fit the post-Enlightenment frame of mind better. There are many historical influences on academia cast in the mould of that thought, including an instrumentalist cost-benefit analysis of the utilitarian kind (Mill, 1972), a formalistic deontological procedure emphasising purely rational arbitration of decision-making (Kant, 1964; Kohlberg, 1981), a sentimentalist philosophy that views desires and emotions (not reason) as the sources of all decision-making (Haidt, 2001), and a positivist philosophy of science that eschews values and ethics in science (Weber, 1949). These influences can be parsed variously, but they were all unfriendly to the concept of *phronesis*. The ideal of a culture centred around wisdom was replaced by the idea of ‘compliance culture’. However, the latter culture happened to undermine rather than strengthen moral compliance, for example in areas of professional life – witness recent professional scandals across the globe (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010).

In the flow and ebb of intellectual opinion, these post-Enlightenment positions have more recently come under heavy criticism for their uncritical bifurcation of facts and values (Anscombe, 1958; Fowers, 2005). At the same time, the rationalistic approach in early moral psychology (Kohlberg, 1981) also suffered a major setback when it transpired that correlations between developmental stages of moral reasoning and actual moral action were low (Blasi, 1980). After this relatively long period in which *phronesis* hardly appeared on academic agendas, we are now experiencing a ‘paradigm shift’, in the Kuhnian sense, in which *phronesis* is afforded pride of place in a variety of discursive fields within philosophy, psychology, education, and professional ethics.

Different theorists use different characterisations to describe this faculty. Burbules (2019) talks about *phronesis* as helping us figure out what to do when we ‘get stuck’. Hursthouse (2006)

describes the *phronimos* (the person possessing *phronesis*) as ‘wisely worldly’ rather than just ‘worldly wise’; and Swartwood (2020) defines practical wisdom as ‘a grasp (1) of what one ought to do, (2) all things considered, (3) in particular situations’. However, all these different theorists understand *phronesis* as a metacognitive capacity to help moral virtues find the right means to their ends.

If *phronesis* has always been needed, this need has arguably never been more acute than now. The idea that different historical epochs require different guiding virtues is not new. The Enlightenment called for performance virtues such as resourcefulness and creativity. The two world wars in Europe and their aftermaths called for the moral virtues of compassion and conciliation. The post-colonial period in Europe called for the civic virtue of social justice. In the view of the three present authors, what is now most urgently required, in a new age of unreason that seems to be descending upon the world, is an intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. Not everyone agrees, however, and there are recent voices in academia worrying that *phronesis* is in fact a redundant concept (Miller, 2021; Lapsley, 2021). We refer to this sceptical view below as ‘*phronesis* eliminativism’.

Attempts to Refine the Aristotelian Concept: The Jubilee Centre Model

The first of the two models that we will explore in this paper is the neo-Aristotelian one (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson et al., 2021) that has been developed in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues.

Because of Aristotle’s own patchy treatment, referred to above, Aristotelian scholar Sarah Broadie refers to *phronesis* as having a ‘rougher terrain’ than most other Aristotelian concepts: one ‘densely thicketed with controversy’ (1991: 179). In one sense, that is an unfortunate situation. It would be easier if *phronesis* constituted an unambiguously defined Aristotelian concept that philosophers and social scientists could either embrace or reject through a set of clearly specified, competing arguments. In another sense, however, the variations in the way *phronesis* is understood, even by Aristotelians, allow for a more nuanced grasp of its moral and methodological salience and make it more easily amenable to new conceptual revisions and updated empirical findings, as aimed for in the current project. These revisions are fully in line with Aristotle’s own methodology of ‘naturalism’ according to which all socio-moral theorising needs to be answerable to the latest empirical research.

The Jubilee Centre has attempted to refine the Aristotelian standard model of *phronesis* by conceptualising it as a four-componential construct where each of the four components performs a specific function, while inter-related with the others (Kristjánsson et al., 2021):

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 amounts to the capacity to ‘read’ a situation by seeing what is most important or central. We can also refer to this function as moral sensitivity.

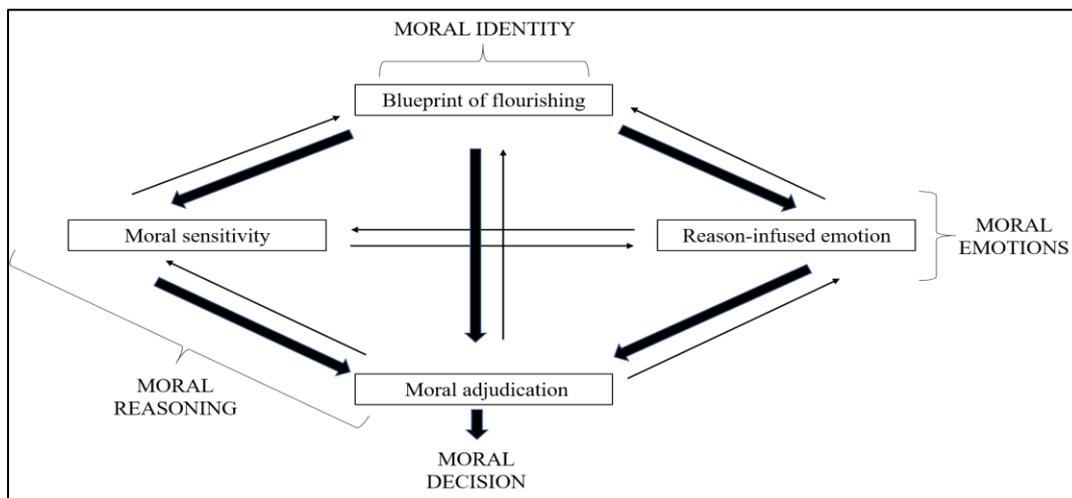
Emotional Regulative Function. Individuals foster their emotional wellbeing through *phronesis* by bringing their emotional responses into line with their understandings of the ethically salient aspects

of their situation, their judgement, and their recognition of what is at stake in the moment. We can also refer to this function as infusing emotion with reason.

Blueprint Function. The integrative work of *phronesis* operates in conjunction with the agent’s overall understanding of the kinds of things that matter for a flourishing life: the agent’s own ethical identity, aims, and aspirations, her understanding of what it takes 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. This amounts to a blueprint of flourishing.

Integrative Function. Through *phronesis*, an individual integrates different components of a good life, via a process of checks and balances, especially in circumstances where different ethically salient considerations, or different kinds of virtues or values, appear to be in conflict and agents need to negotiate dilemmatic space.

The Jubilee Centre model explained:



The main asset of this model, in addition to its historical continuity from Aristotle’s landmark analysis, is its respect for a developmental account of virtue acquisition, according to which the development of individual virtues, through habituation, predates the development of *phronesis*. Another and related asset is the assumption that the primary moral motivation, even in the case of virtue conflicts, continues to come from the individual virtues. So, in a conflict situation between, say, honesty and compassion, the motivation to be honest and compassionate continues to stem from the underlying virtues, although *phronesis* adds a secondary motivation to try to find the best possible way out of the quandary. These can be considered theoretical assets because they align with various standard theories of moral development and moral motivation.

Developing and educating *phronesis* according to this model will be based on strengthening synergistically the discrete components/functions, drawing on various pre-existing accounts of how to cultivate moral sensitivity, virtue literacy, emotion regulation, moral identity, moral reflection, general psychological wisdom, etc. Thorny and as-of-yet unanswered questions remain, however,

about the best order in which this should be done and how exactly these different strategies can be synthesised in the service of the development of the meta-virtue as a whole.

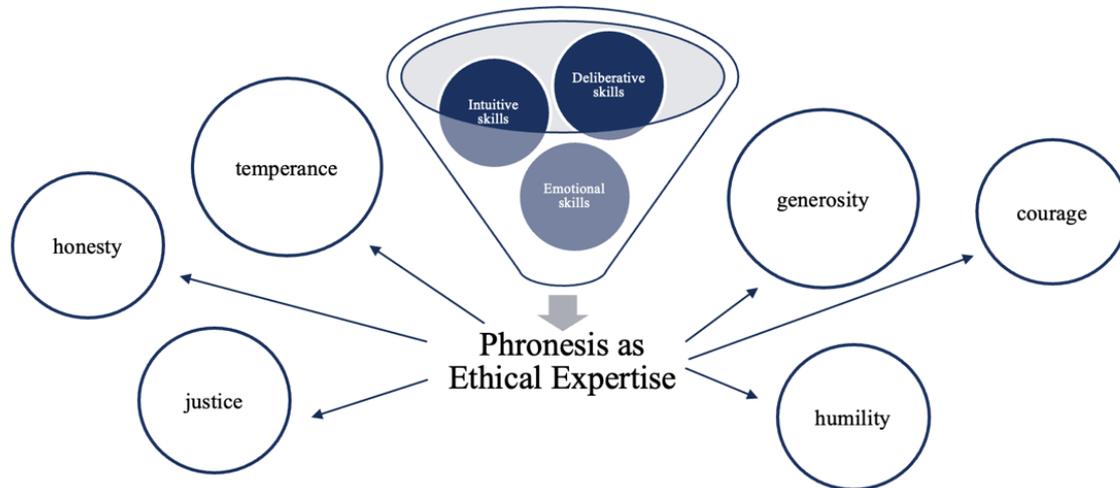
Attempts to Develop a Conception of *Phronesis* as General Ethical Expertise: The Aretai Centre Model

Vaccarezza and colleagues at the Aretai Centre on Virtues, harking back to a skill account of virtue as well as to psychological research on expertise (Gobet and Chassy, 2009; Swartwood and Tiberius, 2019; Tsai, 2020; 2023), have developed a slightly different model of *phronesis* as a form of ethical expertise that has priority over the development of single ethical virtues and comprises intuitive, deliberative, and emotional components. Their model of *phronesis* proposes to replace the traditional interdependence of *phronesis* and the ethical virtues with a one-way dependence of the ethical virtues on *phronesis* (De Caro, Marraffa, and Vaccarezza, 2021). Paraphrasing Kant, they claim that the ethical virtues are *phronesis*' *ratio cognoscendi*, i.e., expressions and manifestations of *phronesis* which make it visible to observers, whereas *phronesis* is the ethical virtues' *ratio essendi*. Virtuousness, in other words, consists of, and coincides with, the possession of *phronesis*, i.e., ethical expertise, which is – strictly speaking – all there is to being virtuous.

One of the main assets of the Aretai Center Model lies in its ability to address eliminativist positions. According to eliminativists such as Miller, for example, it is implausible that the 'multiple functions ascribed to practical wisdom, [...] would all be carried out by a single character trait, given how diverse the functions tend to be' (Miller, 2021: 59). Call this the *Unity Concern*. In addition, the ascription of these functions to *phronesis* looks suspiciously arbitrary (*Arbitrariness Concern*). Also, as Miller argues, according to the *Subsumption Concern*, were it true that *phronesis* is responsible for all the functions traditionally ascribed to it, it would be hard to see what is left of the other virtues. The Aretai Center Model, by equating *phronesis* with ethical expertise, offers a straightforward response to the *Unity* and *Arbitrariness* concerns: since the functions traditionally attributed to *phronesis* correspond to components of ethical expertise – a well-known, non-mysterious, psychologically plausible construct – it is easy to explain why they are not arbitrary, nor is there any stipulation in tracing them back to a single construct. As to the *Subsumption Concern*, the Aretai Model happily bites the bullet: nothing is left of moral virtues, for *phronesis* is necessary and sufficient for being virtuous. This does not mean that it is not useful to keep on talking about virtues; all it suggests is that we should stop conceiving of them as conceptually and motivationally independent traits. As Plato's *Protagoras* has it, when we label someone as, say, courageous, courage is the name of wisdom in that particular domain (*Prot.* 356d–7b). This is why the Aretai Model overturns Miller's *phronesis*-eliminativism into a virtue-eliminativism.

Educationally speaking, this means that, according to the Aretai Model, the main goal of character education is not to habituate single, distinct virtues, but help the seeds of the various components of expertise flourish via specific training aimed at the gradual development of a single, master trait. It is among the main challenges faced by the model to elaborate on a feasible educational path.

The Aretai Centre Model explained:



The Two Models Compared, and Does Their Difference Matter?

While the Jubilee Centre model reinterprets *phronesis* as a virtue whose components can be traced back to and synergises existing psychological constructs, according to the Aretai Model *phronesis* is more fruitfully to be equated with a single psychological construct, namely, ethical expertise, whose different functions are to be seen as sub-skills. Another major difference between the two proposals is the role assigned to the ethical virtues: conceptually and psychologically autonomous in the Jubilee Model, downsized to mere *ratio cognoscendi* according to the Aretai Model.

Despite these seemingly profound differences, the two models agree on more substantial elements than it may appear. Not only do they both conceive of *phronesis* as the key virtue, but also frame it as a composite, multifaceted trait that consists of the secure possession of a diverse set of abilities, ranging from perceptual to deliberative and emotional ones.

Each of the models has its own challenges to meet. As for the Aretai Centre Model, such challenges revolve around three somewhat traditional objections to the identification of *phronesis* with expertise. The *domain* objection has it that, while skills are domain-relative, practical wisdom is general in scope; therefore, practical wisdom cannot be any kind of skill or expertise (Hacker-Wright, 2015). The second has to do with *motivation*: wisdom cannot be a decision-making skill because, unlike skills, a person cannot have it but fail to act on it (Kekes, 1995: 30; Stalnaker, 2010: 408; Mengzi, 2008: xxxiii; Zagzebski, 1996). Finally, it seems that *phronesis*, unlike skills, requires ‘a correct conception of worthwhile ends’ (Hacker-Wright, 2015: 986); compare Kristjánsson (2015: 98) who argues that ‘unlike expert decision-making skills, wisdom requires grappling with existential questions’. One of the main goals of the Aretai Model is precisely to rebut these objections successfully. However, research on expertise, adaptive expertise (Bohle Carbonell, 2014), and

decision-making in challenging performances promises to provide effective ways out of these potentially fatal challenges.

Regarding the Jubilee Centre Model, insofar as it synthesises already existing psychological processes, it seems even more liable than the Aretai Model to *phronesis* eliminativism – although the possible response remains that *phronesis* is no more reducible to its discrete components than decathlon is to the 10 sports that it comprises (Kristjánsson and Fowers, 2021).

In sum, these two models approach *phronesis* from ‘different sides’, so to speak. However, pedantic academic differences aside, from a practical perspective – especially that of secondary-school and college/professional education – what stands out much more prominently is the unified foregrounding by these two models of *phronesis* as a concept of vital importance for moral psychology and character education rather than their different conceptualisations of this concept. As already noted, the area of overlap is that of understanding *phronesis* as holding the key to excellence in moral decision-making.

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