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The Development of *Phronesis* in
Adolescents and Young Adults:
Preliminary Findings

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Aristotelian character developmental theory postulates that young people who have acquired the correct moral traits through habituation and role modelling must develop the virtue of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, to guide their decision-making. If they cannot apply practical wisdom when determining the correct course of action, given the situation and the virtues at play, then they are more likely to make errors in decision-making, and more fundamentally, will lead uncritical lives lacking in intrinsic value. Recent publications by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues have advocated for a practical conception of *phronesis*, which can be measured in order to both determine what components constitute *phronesis* and to develop a tool for investigating differing levels of *phronesis* between groups. The *phronesis* model proposed by the Jubilee Centre is comprised of four components: moral perception, moral adjudication, moral emotion, and moral identity. Initial findings indicate that this model fits both adult and adolescent samples well. Further detailed discussion of the *phronesis* model can be found both in our recent report and a forthcoming peer-reviewed publication (Darnell *et al.*, 2019; Kristjánsson *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, this model can also be used to investigate the development of *phronesis* in adolescents and young adults. Consequently, we conducted a corollary study ($n = 492$) to investigate whether young adults and late adolescents report higher scores than mid-adolescents in measures that represent our latent components of the *phronesis* model in a cross-sectional design. The findings are preliminary; further analyses will be conducted, and results will be published presently.

Participants completed a battery of questionnaires, which approximated the four proposed latent components of *phronesis*: moral perception, moral adjudication, moral emotion, and moral identity. Moral perception was approximated using scores for virtue identification, selection, and relevance, which were derived from the Adolescent Intermediate Concept measure (AD-ICM: Thoma *et al.*, 2013). These measures indicate to what extent participants can identify and select the most relevant conflicts of virtue within a presented dilemma. Moral adjudication was measured using the Situated Wise Reasoning Scale (SWIS: Brienza *et al.*, 2018) and the AD-ICM (Thoma *et al.*, 2013). The SWIS requires participants to reflect on the presented dilemma with regard to their recognition of other perspectives, consideration of how the dilemma might unfold, their own intellectual humility, how conflicts might be resolved, and what external others might think of the situation. In the AD-ICM, participants must rank a set of action choices and potential justifications for said choices in a given dilemma. Moral emotion was measured with two scales from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI: Davis, 1983), which is a self-report measure in which participants indicate their capacities for empathic concern and perspective-taking. Moral identity was recorded using the Moral Self-Relevance Measure (MSR: Patrick & Gibbs, 2012), Contingencies of Self Worth (CSW: Crocker *et al.*, 2003), and Aspects of Identity (AOI: Cheek *et al.*, 2002) questionnaires. The MSR asks participants to rate how important moral and non-moral qualities are to their sense of self. The selected CSW item asked participants to report how important virtuous living was to their self-esteem. Finally, the AOI asks participants to indicate how important their own personal values and moral standards are to them.

Analyses of variance revealed that older participants recorded higher scores than younger participants in empathic concern ($p = .01$), and perspective-taking ($p = .001$), while the reverse was true for virtue identification ($p = .001$), selection ($p = .01$), relevance ($p = .001$), and adolescent moral thinking (ICM: $p = .001$). No significant differences were found between groups in situated wise reasoning (SWIS: $p = .17$), or moral identity (MSR: $p = .45$; CSW: $p = .35$; AOI: $p = .10$). Hence, greater levels of moral emotion, as well as lower levels of moral perception and adjudication, were observed in older participants within the framework of our model.

These results suggest a number of interesting developmental possibilities; in the case of moral emotion, these results link well with prior psychological literature on adolescent development, while in the case of moral perception and adjudication, these results contradict prior work. In past research, levels of empathic concern have been found to increase through adolescence (Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Endresen & Olweus, 2001), and from early adulthood to mid-adulthood (O'Brien, Konrath, Gröhn & Hagen, 2013). Similarly, perspective-taking has reliably been shown to improve throughout adolescence (Dumontheil, Apperly & Blakemore, 2010; Pollard, Burnett Heyes & Apperly, 2018). These findings may support prior work suggesting that as adolescents develop, they are better able to coordinate their moral emotions and their moral reasoning. Adolescents increasingly feel the intensity of their moral emotions, which gives them greater confidence in their own moral judgement (Krettenauer & Eichler, 2006). Our findings bolster this research by showing that moral emotion develops from mid-adolescence to early adulthood and suggest that this developmental pathway might be a crucial mechanism for achieving adult levels of *phronesis*. However, this interpretation is offered tentatively given that, in the case of moral perception and reasoning, our findings contradict past findings that moral reasoning improves through adolescence and into early adulthood (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy & van Court, 1995; Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy & Shepard, 2005). Due to the highly irregular nature of these results, we will not interpret why older participants recorded lower scores on measures of moral perception and moral adjudication until further analyses have been completed.

While these findings are preliminary and must be interpreted with caution, they do suggest the utility of the *phronesis* model not only as a tool for determining the underlying components of *phronesis*, but also for tracking the development of *phronesis* itself. One of the most difficult problems to disentangle in developmental psychology is how different components of a psychological process impact on behaviour, and how these components might emerge at different stages. Humans do not shift from limited cognitive capacities to full cognitive capacities once they breach important developmental 'breakthrough' years – they transition, and different components transition at different rates (e.g. Pollard *et al.*, 2018). A key feature of the *phronesis* model is that it allows one to investigate how different components of *phronesis* may develop at different rates. In this case, our findings indicate that moral emotion is still developing between mid-adolescence and early adulthood, while, for example, moral identity may be fully developed at an earlier stage. Further analysis is needed, further models must be

estimated, but this research demonstrates the great promise of the *phronesis* model for understanding how we, as humans, become practically wise.

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