

PHRONESIS AND COMPLEXITY¹

Phronesis y complejidad

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores two aspects of the Greek concept of «phronesis». On the one hand, it is closely tied to the Aristotelian concept of «virtue» — and is in effect a kind of «meta-virtue». On the other hand, the concept arises in theories of practice, and of practical reasoning more generally. I argue that these two aspects are closely related, and can be understood as two versions of the same thing. This relationship becomes especially clear when we explore the question of how phronesis is learned. Finally, our understanding of phronesis is deepened when we consider how it is enacted in contexts of complexity.

Key words: phronesis; ethics; practice; virtue ethics; practical reason.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo explora dos aspectos del concepto griego de phrónesis. Por un lado, el que está estrechamente relacionado con el concepto aristotélico de «virtud» y es que, en efecto, es un tipo de «meta-virtud». Por otro lado, el concepto se aborda

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también desde las teorías de la práctica y del razonamiento práctico de un modo más general. Argumento que estos dos aspectos están estrechamente relacionados, y que pueden ser entendidos como dos versiones de la misma cosa. Esta relación llega a ser especialmente clara cuando exploramos la pregunta de cómo la *phronesis* se aprende. Para terminar, se expone cómo nuestro entendimiento de la *phronesis* se amplía cuando tenemos en cuenta cómo se aplica en contextos complejos.

Palabras clave: *phronesis*; ética; práctica; ética de las virtudes; razón práctica.

This essay offers some fresh perspectives on a familiar concept, «*phronesis*». My approach questions some of the dichotomies that we find in the literature (such as *techné* versus *phronesis*). Where others see dualities or categories I see relationships — albeit sometimes relationships of tension — between elements joined within a broader theoretical frame. The analytical clarity of definitions runs up against the messy realities of pragmatic circumstance. This is especially true for a concept so central to the concept of «practice» itself.

The literature on *phronesis* is extensive, but there is little consensus about what *phronesis* is (Noel, 1999). Definitions like «practical wisdom» simply push the questions back one stage: what does «wisdom» mean in this context? In the literature on *phronesis*, we see two separate branches: one regarding *phronesis* as a general Aristotelian virtue; the other regarding it as a distinct mode of reasoning in the context of practice. I will begin by discussing these two paths separately and conclude by suggesting that we should regard them as two aspects of the same question.

1. PHRONESIS AND VIRTUE

Chris Higgins (2011) provides a clear definition:

to act virtuously in a concrete situation requires the ability to judge what virtue (or virtues) the situation calls for. It also requires us to be open enough to the irreducible details of the situation to let them instruct us about what virtue means in this particular context. Such judgment is of such central, ethical importance that it constitutes its own virtue, indeed the cornerstone of the virtues, namely *phronesis* or practical wisdom (p. 52).

This quality, that *phronesis* is what enables us to enact other virtues — as well as constituting a virtue unto itself — leads many to call *phronesis* a «meta-virtue».

How does this work? To begin, we should view virtues not as a laundry list of discrete personal characteristics, but as operating as clusters. They are not learned separately, they are not enacted separately. You can define, for example, «courage» and «honesty» separately, but in many contexts being honest requires also a kind of courage. Virtues are not learned discretely, they are not enacted discretely, and they are not sustained in us as we grow and mature as discrete aspects of character. As Higgins states, the relevance of more than one virtue to a concrete situation

introduces a crucial dimension of phronesis: Which virtues are relevant to this case? How do some virtues shape the ways in which other virtues might be enacted here and now? What about potential conflicts among different virtues? We need a process of relating and balancing these virtues in the context of specific choices and actions. As Kristjánsson (2015) says, a virtuous person «possesses the wisdom to adjudicate the relative weights of different virtues in conflict situations and to reach a measured verdict about what to feel and do» (p. 302).

A second dimension of this judgment is navigating between the general and the particular. As Joseph Dunne (1999) explains, phronesis is «deliberative in so far as it helps one to mediate between more generic, habitual knowledge and the particularities of any given action situation». (p. 51) The literature on phronesis is full of the terms deliberation, discernment, perception, insight: enacting virtues is not the turning on of a switch after which one's virtue engine kicks in. A person who is honest is honest in different ways under different circumstances; two different people who are both honest may enact that virtue in different ways under the same or similar circumstances (in part because of the influence of other virtues upon their considerations).

A third dimension of this judgment concerns the virtue of temperance or moderation. As is well-known, the Greeks identified both the deficiency and the surfeit of admirable traits as morally problematic. This idea of a sliding scale of judgment, suited to a given situation — finding the «sweet spot,» we say in English — is a deeply challenging moral view. It is one of the chief things, in my view, that differentiates a virtue theory of ethics from rule-governed or other deontological models. It is not enough to say that if X is a good thing, more and more of X is an even better thing. But how much of X, *here* and *now*, is too much? This is an extremely nuanced process of judgment and experience, tailored (once again) to the particularities of a situation. And, once again, different virtuous people will strike that balance in different ways.

A fourth dimension of this judgment concerns how phronesis spans the traditional distinction of moral and intellectual virtues. In what I have already described, cognitive processes like deliberation and discernment operate in conjunction with intrinsically normative processes like judgment and balancing. As both virtues themselves and regulative «meta-virtues,» phronesis and moderation can be characterized and defined in terms of the challenges of finding the proper balance or «sweet spot.» But they are also at the same time aspects of character and personality that shape our willingness and ability to seek such balancing, to accept the difficulty of deciding the proper thing to do, and of living with ambiguity and imperfection in our judgments. It takes a shift of moral attitude to accept the uncertainty that we have found the best course of action in a situation, that we might never know that we did the «right» thing, that whatever we do there might come a time when we realize that we might have done better. But in this situation, given who we are and what

we are capable of, given constraints of knowledge and time and available attention or energy, it might have been the best we could do. The philosophical search for certainty that drives our efforts toward pursuing the truth has poorly prepared us, I think, for a moral realm that is not about truth or certainty, but about coping as best we can with the choices available to us and the actions of which we are capable. I elsewhere called this the «ethics of good enough,» but perhaps a better characterization is «doing the best we can» (Burbules and Rice, 2010).

2. PHRONESIS AND PRACTICE

The other branch in the literature on phronesis is that it is a distinct form of reasoning that characterizes the domain of *practice* (a domain typically distinguished from that of *techne*, or more instrumental reasoning). So teaching, for example, is often said to be a domain of phronetic practice, not of *techne*. This literature is usually not concerned with the virtue ethics connotations of phronesis; here practical wisdom means judgment based on experience that delineates skilled performance within a complex domain of activity. In the case of teaching, this view reinforces ideas about professionalism and the need to respect the professional discretion of practitioners — as opposed to more technical or «teacher-proof» reforms.

But then we need to ask, What is the domain of practice? The classic definition is MacIntyre's:

By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (1997, p. 187).

Here, a practice is a «socially established cooperative human activity,» with «standards of excellence» that are particular to it — in fact, significantly. MacIntyre says these standards are «partially definitive of that activity,» that is, internal to it and partly defining what successful performance of that practice is. This builds the idea of norms and values into the idea of a practice itself. He goes on to explain what does and does not count as a practice: Tic-tac-toe does not count; chess does. Bricklaying is not a practice; farming is. Teaching, significantly, and to my mind inexplicably, is not a domain of practice for MacIntyre. He says teaching is merely a means to an end (like bricklaying, apparently), and not a practice with goods intrinsic to it. In part the issue of whether something is a practice or not seems to be a determination of simplicity versus complexity; in part a question of more technical, repetitive activity versus a practice that requires constant judgment and adaptation. But either, way, teaching certainly seems to qualify.

In contrast, I want to present a slightly different account, from Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002). They distinguish what they call simple, complicated, and complex problems. A *simple* problem, they say, is something like following a recipe. A *complicated* problem is different in scale, more multifactorial, and requires coordination among a number of factors; but because individual instances are similar to each other at least parts of a solution can be formalized and generalized across instances (their example is sending a rocket to the moon). A *complex* problem has greater uncertainties; individual cases have unique as well as common properties; and experience is no guarantee of success (their example is raising a child). Now, Glouberman and Zimmerman are not trying to define «practices,» and these three categories would not define three kinds of practice — for example, for MacIntyre there would be no such thing as a «simple practice» per se — but extending their ideas I would like to suggest that these describe three aspects of any practice: thinking of a practice as having simple, complicated, and complex elements. Practice is an internally segmented, not a homogeneous enterprise.

This would mean, for example, that the sharp dichotomy of *techne* and *phronesis* is mistaken: that *techne* is part of a complex practice. Some elements of activity within a practice are or can be routine. That does not define the practice as a whole. Being a creative chef also still involves chopping vegetables, for example. *Phronesis* here would be the capacity to assess which aspects of the practice can be approached through *techne*, and which ones cannot. As John Dewey explains in a different context, relegating some parts of a complex activity to habit and routine allows us then to focus our attention and discernment on those aspects that require our full attention and skill (think of driving a car). These aren't opposed to one another, they are related — and related in such a way that one enables the other.

Similarly, *phronesis* entails the capacity for discerning *in which respects* a given situation or problem is unique, and in which respects it is not. Every situation will have elements of both. This dimension of the *complicated* versus the *complex* is a qualitative and not just a quantitative matter. Farming has simple, complicated, and complex elements (but so does bricklaying, I would argue). Sending a rocket to the moon is complicated, in Glouberman and Zimmerman's sense, but it becomes complex the moment something drastic and unprecedented goes wrong (think of the movie «Apollo 13»). In short, one cannot determine in advance which types of activity are *phronetic* and which one are not: sometimes a highly familiar activity becomes *phronetic* — and part of *phronesis* is recognizing when it does and how to deal with it. Moreover, even practices that deeply engage *phronesis* have activities within them which are not themselves *phronetic*. We don't understand *phronesis* (or «practice») by demarcating in advance rigid distinctions of which activities do or don't qualify; it is better to consider the elements of *techne* and *phronesis*, routine and complexity, in a broad range of human activities (such as teaching).

3. HOW WE LEARN PHRONESIS

We don't learn phronesis as a standalone capacity; we learn it in the context of learning particular practices; and the nature of those practices shapes how phronesis is learned. There are general things one can say about phronesis and what it entails in any complex practice:

Deliberating about the available courses of action and their possible consequences;

Judging the human impact of these choices, for others and for one's self;

Problem-solving about the methods of one's actions, how to accomplish certain aims, and the possibility of alternative approaches;

Recognizing situations in their relations of similarity and difference to other precedents, drawing from relevant personal experiences or from vicarious cases to help perceive the key elements of this situation;

Keeping short-term and longer-term goals in mind, understanding that the first are usually more clear than the latter;

Balancing alternative considerations, which includes attaching weight to what seems most significant in the situation at hand;

Making choices even when the pathways are not perfectly clear;

Relegating to routine what can be relegated, and recognizing what requires more focused attention;

Finding the path of moderation between the Scylla and Charybdis of too much or too little of a good thing;

Dealing emotionally with ambiguity and uncertainty, but not being paralyzed by it;

Accepting the risk of error, reflecting on its causes, and learning from it;

Metacognitive awareness about one's typical ways of thinking about problems (for example, a tendency to be impatient or to forge overconfidently ahead), including the possibility of blind spots; and

Figuring out what to do when you get «stuck,» as Robert Pirsig (1999) once asked, and really don't know what to do next.

In drawing up this list I am trying to give shape to what I mean by a process of practical action that is always imperfect and incomplete. But we do not learn phronesis as a general laundry list of traits — although some experiences in life, for example, responses to literature, or dealing with a personal tragedy, failure, or disappointment, might cultivate some of them. I am skeptical in general about the direct «transfer» of general capabilities or dispositions learned in one domain of practice being automatically carried over to another. Part of the idea of virtue is consistency across contexts: we expect an honest person to be (almost) always

honest. But we also question a person who rigidly adheres to certain ways of being regardless of context or circumstance. Phronesis, as I have discussed, entails these kinds of judgments; what it means to be honest in *this* situation, with *this* person, under *these* circumstances. The distinctive nature of different practices also matters: we learn to enact phronesis in one way in sports, in another way in cooking, and in yet another way in making difficult medical decisions. And so we need to consider what these phronetic traits mean in the context of *particular* practices — particularly those with a high degree of «complexity» in Glouberman and Zimmerman's terms.

My point here, however, is not only about learning phronesis in the context of particular practices — as an applied method of making these general traits or dimensions of phronesis concrete and meaningful. It is also that what it means to learn a practice — any practice — is to begin to develop the capacity for phronesis: it is what successful engagement and experience with that practice entails.

When discussing these concepts, I have been using the ideas of learning, enacting, and sustaining. It would be a mistake to view these sequentially: first you learn something — say, a virtue — then you enact it as part of your life, and over time you work to sustain that capacity. Rather, you learn certain things *by* enacting them; in order to sustain them you need to be *continually* learning (and relearning); and so on. Learning is not a single-point achievement. This too makes the learning of a practice a phronetic endeavor; our capacities for phronesis *in the context of these activities* grow along with our skills at that practice; and our capacities for that practical activity grow along with our emerging capacity for phronesis.

Let me just give one example to illustrate my point. In any complex practice we will make mistakes, and these are not just abstract mistakes: they are real failures with real consequences — which might be quite serious. It is simple and trite to say, «Learn from your mistake and don't let it happen again». For one thing, the experience of making a mistake can be devastating. We might doubt our capacity for the practice; we might doubt ourselves; we might become risk-averse, which can have its own detrimental effects on successful practice. So before we can «learn from the mistake,» we often need to go through a morally suffused process of reflection on responsibility, contingency, failure, and our own human imperfection. These are matters of feeling and not just rationalization. Only then, perhaps, can we think about the reasons for the mistake, warning signs of it recurring, and how to avoid it in the future. I want to say that *all of this* is part of learning phronesis, and all of it is part of learning any complex practice — because any complex practice is certainly going to involve mistakes, failures, and disappointments. But the particular character of those mistakes, failures, and disappointments will be determined by the nature of that practice itself. Sometimes, as in a game, the consequences may be short-lived; in a practice like medicine the consequences may be lifelong. Even experience with mistakes, failures, and disappointments in other contexts may not prepare you for *that*.

4. PHRONESIS AND VIRTUE AS A PRACTICE

My main purpose is to suggest that phronesis as a moral virtue and phronesis as the mode of reasoning distinctive to practices are really two ways of talking about the same thing. On the one hand, practices have a normative component: what it means to do a practice well, the purposes and effects that make a practice worthwhile, the values that draw us to committing to a practice and working at becoming good at it (teaching, by the way, has all of these things, which makes MacIntyre's view so puzzling). This means that the phronesis of a practice has the same basic elements as phronesis as a virtue: deliberation, problem-solving, discernment of the relevant features of a situation, and balancing different considerations in finding the approach that best improves the situation. But carrying out a complex practice involves many situations, many considerations of efficacy and of effects, many balancings of short term and long term aims, many challenges of coping with aims we foresee and desire, and coping with unintended consequences we can only partly foresee (if even then), and which complicate or frustrate our intended aims.

All of these dimensions of complex practices involve value judgments. They involve reflections on ourselves, on our purposes and motivations. They involve emotions. They can pose profound challenges to our commitment to the practice — especially when, as noted earlier, they involve failure and disappointment. All of this makes demands upon our character and our identity as a practitioner (of medicine, of farming — and certainly yes, of teaching). In all of this, we are exercising phronesis as a virtue. Wisdom, judgment, balancing and moderation are dimensions of successful practice — but more than this they are dimensions of our ongoing commitment to the practice and being sustained in our identity as a practitioner. Thinking of phronesis in the context of practice as something that we learn how to do (and learn how to do better), that we enact in challenging situations that call forth our best efforts, and that we need to be sustained in continuing to do even under difficulties, all bring the virtue sense of phronesis into play.

On the other hand, what is a virtue? What is moral conduct? It is something we learn how to do, something that we actively and creatively enact, something that is sustained in us and which we, hopefully, perform better over time. Virtue is a practice, a learned activity that entails judgment, problem-solving, moderation — and growth. This also involves phronesis.

There is a crucial social dimension here as well. We acquire virtues through our interactions with others: parents, friends, members of the community we look up to, characters in history (or in literature and legend) whom we want to emulate. But we also engage these social interactions, much of the time, in how we enact virtues: we discuss dilemmas or choices with others, we ask for advice, we confess our doubts and uncertainties. We often imagine the virtuous individual as independent and self-directed, driven by the inner engine of virtue to discern and enact the proper thing in various situations. Certainly this is sometimes the case, and sometimes

one must rely on that inner engine. But the profound individualism of Aristotle's conception of virtue is something we need to question. Much of the time we need interactions and communication with others to help us figure out the proper thing to, and to help us stay true to our virtuous inclinations. This is even more true when we think about sustaining virtues in ourselves over time: the recognition, respect, and support of others is part of our ongoing commitment and drive to improve. We sometimes carry around with us the mythic ideal of the virtuous person who does not need the approval of others, who acts rightly without, and sometimes despite, the opinions of others. But it is a mistake to think of this as the pure form of virtue. We need to rethink virtue more relationally.

If virtue is a practice, and indeed a social practice, phronesis as a virtue has a social and communicative dimension: «practical wisdom» comes from somewhere. The capacities for discernment, for balancing, for moderation require close appreciation of the particulars of a situation — but they require some distancing from it too. Social interactions and seeing things through other people's eyes (even when this might be an imaginary or hypothetical perspective) is part of what cultivates the virtue of phronesis in us. We can consider matters from different perspectives, we can stand outside our frameworks or assumptions, we can gain in our patience and capacity for dispassionate reflection — all of these are qualities of wisdom. And all of these are learned. In modern terms we call this capacity for self-awareness and the ability to reflect on one's own processes of thought and understanding, *metacognition*. Vygotsky and others have theorized this capacity as the internalization of the voices of others, the ability to recreate internally the benefits of an outside perspective. This is not a topic typically considered in theories of virtue.

Another aspect of this social dimension is the relevance of diversity and culture. Phronesis, and virtue theory generally, is a theoretical product of the elite, male, Hellenic culture of Athenian philosophy circa 335 BCE. The presumption that this is a universal moral theory is highly questionable. Thinking of virtue as a practice provides a useful perspective on this issue. Practices are often grounded in a particular social and cultural context, but they can become cross-cultural. The question is not universality, but translatability — which is a practical, situated process. Moral standards and processes of moral reflection can be shared cross-culturally, not through the philosophical argument that because they are universal others must come to share them, but because people come to recognize that they are conducive to a better life, a life they want to participate in. Compare, for example, the spread of modern medical practices. People come to share them because they seek the quality of life they make possible (others may choose not to). But even when these practices do come to be shared, they often take forms that are adapted to local tradition or cultural circumstance. This is what can occur with virtues, viewed as practices that others come to want to adopt (and adapt). What aspects come to be shared, and which take on a local form, cannot be determined in advance: translation

is a *process*. Hence sharing is not an all or nothing endeavor. Finally, this pattern is true not only cross-culturally, but also *within* a social and cultural context. Different people can participate in the same practice in different ways. And people can enact the same virtue in different ways. We don't normally think of morality, specifically here virtue theory, in that way — but I am suggesting that we should. The standard model is that in any moral situation there is a «right» thing to do, and that different people who are thinking properly will arrive at the same conclusion. It is a challenging alternative to suggest that there are better and worse choices, not simply specific «right» and «wrong» choices, and that different people, confronting the same situation and enacting the same virtues, might still arrive at different conclusions about what to do. This is especially, but not only, true in cases of cultural difference. This is not relativism, in the sense that is normally meant; but it does mean that we need to think *relationally* and what it means to enact virtues in specific contexts.

This relationship of phronesis as virtue and phronesis as a part of practice also sheds light on the question of how phronesis is learned. We say that phronesis grows with experience — but to state the obvious, this means the having of experiences: experiences of difficulty, of success and of failure, of being «stuck» and not knowing what to do. These kinds of experiences foster a certain attitude toward practice: a tolerance for uncertainty and doubt; the need for persistence; an ability to adapt to circumstance. But in the same way, such experiences foster an attitude toward moral conduct: a shift from right and wrong actions to better and worse ones; a recognition and, up to a point, an acceptance of one's imperfections and limitations; an attitude of learning and improvement as a process over time, albeit a process that inevitably includes failure and disappointment.

On a related note, virtue theory emphasizes discernment, and discernment about the particularities of a moral situation. But what is a *situation* (we sometimes say, «we're having a situation here» or «I found myself in a situation»). I think it is useful to think of a moral situation not just as a set of circumstances, but as a certain *kind* of set: a set of circumstances that is recognizable, that has aspects of familiarity with other situations, as well as aspects of difference. A job interview, for example, is a situation with certain recurring features across varied contexts. If you describe this situation to others, they will recognize some of these familiar features. No situation is entirely unique or *de novo*; and this is crucial because those elements of familiarity, as we recognize them, are the starting points for weighing what to do. Situations are the stuff of *experience*. In practical contexts this is how we develop skills and strategies — sometimes growing out of trial and error — that are derived from one situation but that we can borrow and adapt in another. Sometimes this application is quite direct, and repeatable, and so becomes an expression of *techne*. In moral contexts, the same process, I am suggesting, applies. Moral actions are ways of coping with problems and challenges, worked out in situations that provide the basis for experience that we learn from and adapt to other situations. Sometimes

this process is creative and highly adaptive; sometimes it is a matter of doing more or less the same thing that worked before, again. Part of moral conduct is just good habits. As I argued earlier, *techne* and *phronesis* aren't opposites — they are aspects of the same process.

Finally, I want to return to Glouberman and Zimmernan and the challenges of complexity. A running theme across my comments has been coping with situations of difficulty, ambiguity, conflicting values, unexpected or even unprecedented circumstances, incomplete information, uncertain consequences or effects, the inevitability of failure and disappointment at least part of the time. I tend to say things like «coping with» rather than «solving» these problems because I doubt that there are *solutions* to certain situations — just better and worse choices. That is not all of life, thank goodness, but it is part of life. And it is frequently part of our moral lives.

Situations of complexity cultivate dimensions of *phronesis* that can't be cultivated in other ways — not just for the obvious reason that we need hard problems to push and develop our capabilities — but because situations of complexity are challenging to us in these other ways. They can produce confusion, frustration, failed attempts, and self-doubt; but they can also yield patience, persistence, acceptance of one's imperfections, and a certain broader wisdom about the human condition. These are all crucial aspects of learning *phronesis*, and they cultivate a particular sort of attitude toward practical and moral challenges.

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