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EDUCATING PHRONESIS AND PHRONESIS FOR EDUCATORS: TWO NEO-ARISTOTELIAN PERSPECTIVES

Abstract: Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* lays the foundation of the concept of intellectual virtues and of phronesis as a virtue crucial for attaining eudaimonia. However, Aristotle did not elaborate on detailed implications of phronesis considering education although this topic has wide theoretical potential. The neo-Aristotelian reflections on education, motivated mainly from the development of virtue ethics, shed new light on the educational potential of phronesis in two directions: first, directed towards moral education theory, and second, directed towards professional ethics in educational practices.

This article will make brief overview of these two “reconstructivists” perspectives. Firstly, the discussion will be focused on their attempts for explaining the development of phronesis-guided virtue form habituated virtue and its educational implications. Secondly, the fundamentals of the role of phronesis in developing professional wisdom in the educational practice will be discussed. Lastly, the theoretical and practical successfulness of the two perspectives as well as their role in ethical education in contemporary classrooms will be elaborated on.

Keywords: Education, Phronesis, Neo-aristotelianism, Virtue ethics

Phronesis

Phronesis or practical wisdom is firstly explicitly elaborated in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* as one of the intellectual virtues. He distinguishes between two kinds of virtues: intellectual and ethical. Ethical are the virtues of character (justice, courage, temperance etc.), while intellectual are the virtues whose purpose is to provide the measure of right reason. They are divided into two subgroups: cognitive, which deals with eternal truths, and deliberative, which is related to practical life. The first includes: scientific knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη/episteme*), intuitive reason (*νοῦς/nous*) and theoretical/philosophical wisdom (*σοφία/sophia*), and the second: art/skill (*τέχνη/techne*) and practical wisdom (*φρόνησις/phronesis*). Aristotle defines phronesis as “a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man.” (*NE* 1140b4-6)

Phronesis is a virtue that represents the excellence of the decisive, judgmental part of the rational soul and refers to the ethical virtues as their guide and regulator in an ever changing life contexts. Phronesis mediates and supervises the ethical virtues so that they find their proper goal and the appropriate means to achieve that goal. The properness and appropriateness of the virtuous action in Aristotle’s ethics are put in terms of finding the middle course that lays between two extremes, or popularly said – to find the golden mean. For example, courageous person lies between the coward and the rash person; temperance is between self-indulgence and insensibility, and liberality between prodigality and meanness. However, the mean is not universally given, but takes into account the context of the agent. The dietary mean of the athlete is not the same as of the non-athlete. Finding the mean in a particular situation requires detailed and thoughtful deliberative process in which phronesis gets the prime role. “Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom [phronimos] would determine it.” (*NE* 1106b36-1107a3) The excellence in deliberation, according to Aristotle, should always consider the end, the manner and the time of action and phronesis should recognize them in every situation. It engages the agent in a decision-making process that leads to specific context-sensitive actions. Practical

wisdom is a kind of mediation between the general and the particular and the ability to bring the two aspects into a binding relationship. This leads to a good life that is not a straight line; but a complex, context sensitive and recognizable in principle. Aristotle metaphorically links phronesis to the specific measuring ruler of the builders from the island Lesbos that could measure uneven surfaces, thus making an analogy with the unevenness in ethical life. The prime goal of phronesis is achieving eudaimonia (“happiness”; or “well-being”, “flourishing”) and all decisions that are made in order to find the proper mean should be in the light of providing a well rounded life.

Phronesis has been re-contextualized in modern ethical theories within the ethics of virtue. Plurality of interpretations emerged, implying various directions of thought. These neo-Aristotelian perspectives have recently been intensively introduced in relation to educational practice. In this paper I will elaborate on the key points of the two segments in which phronesis is connected with education – how phronesis can be educated and how phronesis can improve the educational practice.

Educating Phronesis⁵⁰

The emergence of extensive and elaborate theories of educating phronesis is expected considering the intensive revival of phronesis-inspired moral education theories. However, as Kristjánsson points out, it is a mystery that elaborate discussion on the actual cultivation of phronesis lacks and is reduced to general discussion of virtue development or to repetition of Aristotle’s truisms. (Kristjánsson, 2014, 152) Empirical research, especially in the field of psychology, has contributed in the wisdom discussion and recently has got the much needed philosophical input in the direction of virtue ethics. (Darnell et al., 2022) Whatever pretentious and hopeful our expectation may be, this question lays in the foundations of the perennial problems that refer to acquiring virtues and attaining eudaimonia. The everlasting question of whether or how practical wisdom can be taught is out of the scope of this article, but several key points considering this question will be exposed. Aristotle’s positions are the beginning points for every neo-Aristotelian phronesis developmental account and there is where we begin.

Since phronesis deals with both the general and the particular, two categories are extremely important for phronesis development – time and experience. Aristotle considers young people not to be phronetic because they lack experience. However, young people do good, but their actions are not completely autonomous. This is achieved by habituation and disposition to act good in a constant manner through external guidance (parents, teachers etc.). Those who learn to acquire virtue are like “those who have just begun to learn a science”, they “can string together its phrases, but do not yet know it; for it has to become part of themselves, and that takes time” (*NE* 1147a20–22). By constantly practicing virtuous acts, the agent is nurturing disposition (*hexis*) for acting good, thus building stable character state. In this process, the agent is making conscious deliberative nuances of the ethical situations and his/her behavior culminates in an informed and phronetically directed practice. But the question arises: how does the transition from habitual virtue to phronesis-inspired virtue is made?

Aristotle draws a kind of model of moral development although it should not be understood in a contemporary moral developmental sense. The first stage is that of “the many” where the young children and many of the adults who have failed to connect with their reasonable part are. The many “do not by nature obey the sense of shame, but only fear, and do not abstain from bad acts because of their baseness but through fear of punishment” (*NE* 1179b11-13). The “incontinent” are at the second stage who, although act virtuously most of the time because they know what is morally right and can resist the painful passions, can still be easily overwhelmed by

⁵⁰ Parts of this subheading draw materials from my previous paper Поповска (2018).

counter-moral pleasures. “The continent” are on the third level. They are those who can overcome both the painful and pleasant pleasures, have a high self-control, and the non-reasonable part of their soul follows the reason. However, self-control is not considered as an exemplary state, and the “continent” person still has base passions and wants to act badly, even if s/he refrains from doing so. The fully virtuous agent is at the fourth stage. S/he can manage to attain full alignment of the passions and feelings with reason. S/he is constantly in a state of desiring the right goal, with developed, and only for him/her, specific phronesis that can acquire the goal of the mean. This condition is not acquired counter naturally because each child has the natural aspiration to overcome the three degrees, but this demands a difficult educational process in which a qualitative change in character occurs.

What can be deduced from the already said is that phronesis development is not a leaping process and is a gradual one. The child gradually learns to look at things from a more nuanced perspective and is gradually introduced to the critical sphere under the guidance of external mentor. The child is building moral insights through experiences that are increasingly more and more dependent on him/her. At the end, the child, now probably adolescent or adult, adds innovation in his/her deliberations and actions since now can better make decisions that fits best his/her context and affinities. This process represents qualitative progression of the character which gradually changes the attitude of “*so and so to act*” towards “*why so and so to act*”. In this developmental context, Annas uses the skill analogy. (Annas, 2011) Aristotle himself is against the art/skill (techne) – phronesis identification, despite the fact that he himself points to such analogies; for example, we acquire the virtues as the builder builds and as lyre-player plays the lyre. Still, Annas believes that this analogy can solve plenty of dilemmas considering virtue. According to Annas, learning of the skill requires both trusting the teacher and be aware of the process of learning, but also of our independent understanding of that process. She accentuates two important aspects of the analogy, namely trough virtue-art/skill learning is cultivating both the need to learn and the drive to aspire.

A great deal of effort is put in recent literature in order to reconstruct Aristotle’s initial points in details and to adapt them in more contemporary vocabulary and context. The better understanding of the phronesis development we have, the better understanding of the methods of its acquiring we will have. Varieties of approaches can be traced; amongst the latest phronesis dichotomy approaches arise the ones that are “intrinsicly” and “extrinsicly” (towards the others) oriented. Darnell et al. (2022) in the operationalization and measurement of their phronesis model accentuate four components: constitutive function (virtue identification, selection and relevance), integrative function (action choices and justification), blueprint function (moral identity) and emotion regulation (empathy and perspective taking). Rajský and Wiesenganger (2021) accentuate the relationality and “the other” as a key aspect for the constitution, acquisition and realization of virtues as opposed to the perspective of acquisition of interior personal qualities.

Until phronesis measurement is proved possible (if it really is!) we are left with several key premises that authors agree on. Although he does not specify how, a good news is that Aristotle gives two important directions: 1. a great deal of acquiring phronesis is left on education and on life experience, and 2. phronesis is developmental. Phronesis cannot be learned exclusively in schools, but a possibility is left for a phronetic classroom and curriculum development. In that context, ethical education should be insisted on at all levels of education and throughout the educational curriculum. Both universals and particularities, but also their unification, should be taken into account at the same time by educational models and methods that can be effective, like, practical learning, role-playing, problem solving, philosophy with children approach (Peterson&Bentley, 2015) etc. Many of them does not hold a monopoly over phronesis development, but surely can contribute to character building. Exactly because this aspect of the education is emphasized, these methods are introduced in the so-called “character education” programs, developed all over the world.

Methods can be changed and developed considering the particularities of every educational system, however another dimension of phronesis development should be inevitably stressed here that we think bears the most important role – that of the phronetic teacher. The most important factor for phronetic classroom are not the methods that contribute to phronesis development, but that of the phronetic teacher. The teacher should not be taken as an external factor of the pupil's internal moral processes, but as a key factor for properly guiding and motivating pupil's own affinities by connecting them with their life contexts. And this bring us back to the fundamental ethic discussion in Plato's *Meno*, namely who counts as the teacher of the virtues?

Phronesis for Educators

In the last two decades, phronesis intensively appears in the field of professional ethics. (Walker&Ivanhoe, 2009; Bondi et al., 2011; Kinsella&Pitman, 2012) Aristotle's text does not offer any kind of such particularist endeavor as special phronesis and he would, probably, even contest such a concept; nevertheless, the neo-Aristotelian reconstructivist and transformative attempts found a rich and promising concept that can seriously improve the foundations of professional ethics in various professions. The introduction of phronesis in this field is primarily intended to escape the formalism of rules and norms in professional ethics in the so-called "people professions" (nursing, social work, education, psychotherapy, law, business, army, police). The aim is to reconsider the evidence-based rationality and the scientific views in professional practices that are dominant in most of these professions and to stress the importance of the dimension of ethics and values, rather that of science, facts, skills and competences. Terms such as "profession", "professionalism", "people professions" understood as standard operational and behavioral skills or competencies are avoided, and the terms "practice" and "people practices" are used instead (Dunne, 2011). In this sense, even the term "professional ethics" is problematic and instead "practitioner's ethics" is used⁵¹. These reconsiderations affect not only the moral deliberation and action in these practices, but also the education and training.

Phronesis is related to education in the framework of the field of ethics of education. Phronesis is here treated as practical professional wisdom that can be cultivated in professional education. According to this phronesis narrative, the language of professional competencies is considered to be incompatible with the moral dimension of teaching practice in which context sensitive decisions and deliberations of a particular kind should be made, nurtured by care and warmth and encouraged by human relations leading to well-being and flourishing. Phronesis relates to educational knowledge that is action oriented; is embedded in experiential educational realm that takes into consideration particular educational contexts that correlates the universals; is driven by the character of every participant in that educational context, primarily that of the teacher; and has a goal to achieve well-being in the educational process taken as a whole.

With this phronesis narrative, the emotional practice of education and the emotions in the educational discourse are introduced where the cultivation of personal qualities and character are required, as opposed to the exclusively impersonal and disinterested educational approaches. According to the phronesis narrative, the educational practice does not represent a technology of pedagogy based on behavioral science of learning, nor is it a procedure subject to experimentation and observation that is standardized and measurable. There must be a strong moral component emphasized in these activities, because education itself is a moral act and teaching is an ethical practice that should lead to phronesis.

⁵¹ Being aware of this distinctions that some authors accept (for ex. Dunne, 2011), later in the text will be used the term "professional ethics" in a broader sense, as is used in most of the literature in the fields that connect ethics and special fields of work.

The introduction of phronesis develops a praxis-phronesis perspective (Kristjánsson, 2016) versus a rule based profession – an attempt to bridge the gap between educational theory and practice. Educational reasoning and reflection are associated with pronesis, and the education with practice in order to overcome the educational techne that develops educational technicians with measurable skills. The process of education involves complex context-sensitive deliberation; it is a practice that requires flexible and sensitive judgment in context-changing educational circumstances. The teacher should nurture receptivity to specific educational situations and problems, flexibility in their interpretation and solution, openness to new and unexpected situations and ability to relevantly and creatively apply the general pedagogical knowledge.

Phronesis in the complex educational situation can be understood in several directions, not only in individual, but also in a collective term. Phronesis can refer to the overall educational situation, the classroom, the school, the curriculum, the teacher himself, the students, the social processes etc., but dominantly to that of the teacher. Various approaches are recognized relying on different aspects of phronesis: situationalist, rationalistic, moral character approaches (cf. Noel, 1999) etc. Phronesis can be related to “giving practical arguments” (Fenstermacher, 1987), “discrimination” (Sherman, 1989); “discernment” (Schuchman, 1980); “phronetic insight” (Dunne, 1993), “pedagogical tact” (Van Manen, 1991) etc. The ancient Greek term “krisis” (discernment, discrimination) has important role in the educational exercise of phronesis, especially in the educational interplay between particulars and universals. Also is emphasized perception, or practical perception, in correlation with the metaphor of the vision and the eye used in Aristotle for description of phronesis. (Dunne, 1993) In these approaches, a slight tip over of the particularist view can be observed, probably as a reaction of the dominant rule/principle-based approaches.

So, how can phronesis be enhanced in the educational practice? The conclusion for this part will, in part, coincide with the previous. Namely, ethical education should be included in educational curriculum for educators, both as a separate course and throughout the curriculum. Both universals and particularities, but also their meaningful unification should be taken into account simultaneously. The general ethical theories should be infused with (practical) examples that will function as illustrations, not as prescribed, observable and measurable behaviors and principles; and every particular insight should refer to its conceptual foundations. However, despite the constant insisting of this kind of pre-service preparation, teacher education is neglecting this essential aspect; and where this aspect is not neglected it is not contributing adequately, especially in terms of applying it in individually accountable practices. (cf. Campbell, 2011) Even the literature considering character education for teachers, the discussions and terminology often resemble the standard scientific narrative. (Jope, 2014)

The relation of specific (professional) and universal phronesis is our final concern for this part of the paper. How can anyone nurture professional phronesis without being phronimos? Driven by the logical principle of subalternation by which the particular is implied by the universal (mainly articulated by Aristotle), but also relating to the nature of phronesis as an all-encompassing concept that leads to human flourishing, we believe that the professional phronesis that relates to the specific educational practice should coincide with the universal phronesis. Professional morality should be derived from already established general moral identity that is molded through the specificities of professional educational contexts. Hence, a good phronetic teacher should be a phronimos. However, having undergraduate ethics education for educators does not warrant developing full phronesis, but it inevitably extends the previously nurtured moral experience and knowledge. It is not too late – teachers get acquainted of their own character, beliefs and values about themselves as teachers, but also about the society and the world; however, this is not sufficient. This brings us back again to the beginning and the importance of early phronesis development; similarly, as the Aristotle’s *circulus virtuosus* of acting and being virtuous, we are put into circularity, but now in the context of education.

Conclusion

In the both neo-Aristotelian perspectives that connect phronesis and education we propose enhancing the curriculum of primary and secondary schools, as well as the pedagogical undergraduate one, with ethical education, but encompassed in a meaningful and character infused way. This call is not a novice; it has been repeatedly insisted on. (ex. Донеб et al., 2019; Sanger and Osguthorpe, 2013) However, the challenges of phronesis in general, whose elaboration exceeds the scope of this paper, are numerous; and the “two-way illumination between particular and universal” (Nussbaum, 2001, 306) in educational contexts has its own specific challenges. Universals like: various theories of the goals of education and teaching, curriculum goals and contents, teaching methods, school and classroom rules, lesson planning etc., should be connected with particulars like: particular teacher with her/his own teaching and personal specificities, particular students that come from various particular socioeconomic, cultural, religious, political, intellectual, emotional contexts in particular school and particular classroom etc. Having in mind all of these variables and invariables one can get the impression that educational context is an inhospitable ground for developing phronesis. However, the same applies to life. Referring to Nussbaum and her reflections on conditions of human life, Jope (2014) discuss the educational challenges in the framework of the concepts: uncertainty, vulnerability and particularity, as conditions of the educational and especially of teacher’s life. Life, as well as classrooms, are changeable and uncertain; the risk of loss and the danger of conflict in the (educational) world of perishable objects and relationships makes us vulnerable; our human life lays always in the particularities and is historically/contextually embedded. According to her, it is of ethical relevance how everyone in the educational context, especially the teacher, is reacting to this uncertainty, vulnerability and particularity because it is precisely where phronesis arises.

From this point of view, it can be said that cultivation of (educational) phronesis is a cultivation of oneself to open to the uncertainties of the curvy line of (educational) life, to expose oneself to the unexpected (educational) outcomes, and, still, in these circumstances, to valiantly “measure” the bumpy terrain with the specific ruler of our character in order to build well rounded (educational) life. As educators, we are left with the optimistic and humanistic Socratic idea that virtue can be learnt and we should do as much as the school form enable us. That is why we vehemently search ways how to educate educators not only to educate virtue, but also to be virtuous. We search for curriculum developments, methods, moral development theories etc. Wherever this endeavor will leave us, at the end phronesis has to be left open, unfinished, since phronesis itself is an open concept. This does not entail that methods and theories are not utile, but that are not definite; and this never-ending search in the indefinite (educational) realm makes our endeavor meaningful as educators, but also as human beings.

Phronesis has been reread, revisited and re-conceptualized within every philosophical paradigm and era. It always retained its basic presupposition, but has always been “flavored” with the local and temporal “spices”. These spacio-temporal philosophical specificities had, as their background, the problems and needs of the contemporaneity. One of the “spices” of the XXI century re-conceptualizations, for example, is that we even speak about specific phronesis – educational phronesis, medical phronesis, business phronesis etc. This reflects our deep devotion to separation, partition and specialization of concepts and ideas in different fields. However, this is not methodologically wrong; neo-isms are supposed to shed new contemporary contextualized light over the old concepts. Old concept should, in return, remind the present of some valuable ideas that can reshape it. Neo-Aristotelian phronesis is a good way to start!

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EMPIRICAL PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH BETWEEN THE TWO WARS – THE CASE OF SLOVENIA

Abstract: The influence of socioeconomic factors on children's development and school performance is a field of research that is receiving increasing attention in the international and national environment. Addressing inequalities resulting from the child's environment is directly related to the issue of the fairness of the school system. This article investigates the beginnings of empirical research on this topic in Slovenia between the two world wars. Along with the methodology,