

International Conference

PHRONESIS

IN THEORY & PRACTICE



Gdańsk, 8–9 May 2025

**Institute of Philosophy
University of Gdańsk**



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Abstracts

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Phronesis and Virtue Internalisation

It has been suggested in passing that *phronesis* can facilitate the internalisation of virtue (e.g., Jubilee Centre, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2017). This conceptual paper takes a closer look at some possible connections between (1) the development of *phronesis* and (2) the internalisation of virtue.

1. Phronesis

The paper follows Kristjánsson and Fowers' (2024) neo-Aristotelian model of *phronesis*, comprising four components or functions:

- i. *Constitutive* (moral perception)
- ii. *Emotional regulative* (reason-infused emotion)
- iii. *Blueprint* (a general justifiable conception of the good life)
- iv. *Integrative* (adjudication between conflicting virtues).

2. Virtue Internalisation

Among the various components of virtue – perception, emotion, desire, motivation, behaviour, style (Kristjánsson, 2017) – the only component that could meaningfully undergo a process of “internalisation” is that of motivation. Such a process is described by Organismic Integration Theory (Pelletier & Rocchi, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017), which situates four types of motivation along an autonomy continuum:

- a. *External* (rewards, sanctions, compliance)
- b. *Introjected* (avoid guilt, enhance self-worth)
- c. *Identified* (personally valued behaviour)
- d. *Integrated* (coherence with other aspects of the self).

Thus, a virtue would be internalised as its motivation moved along this continuum, from (a) to (d). It is worth observing that (a)-(d) largely concur with Aristotelian levels of moral development (e.g., Curzer, 2012; Sanderse, 2017; cf. Krettenauer & Stichter, 2023).

3. Connections between (1) and (2)

(iii) → (c)

Having a blueprint of the good life encourages one to personally value or identify with behaviours that align with this blueprint.

(c) → (iv)

The integrative function of phronesis needs virtues to act upon; one cannot adjudicate between conflicting virtues until one has sufficiently internalised – to the level of (c), I would argue – at least two virtues.

(iv) → (d)

Apparent conflict among internalised virtues must be resolved before the self can be experienced as fully coherent.

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Practical Wisdom: Natural and Artificial

The rapid evolution of Artificial Intelligence from rule-based systems to data-driven deep learning models has intensified discussions about embedding ethical frameworks into AI systems. Recent research explores the feasibility of implementing virtue ethics, proposing that AI can learn to exhibit virtuous behavior through role-playing games and moral simulations. In my talk, I'll argue that integrating three principles could guide the development of ethical AI:

Ethical Particularism: This principle asserts that moral judgments should be based on the specifics of a situation rather than general principles (such as those of deontological ethics and consequentialism), aligning with virtue ethics, which emphasizes moral character. In AI, this approach suggests that systems should assess each scenario individually, considering the unique context to make ethical decisions. Implementing virtue ethics can create more adaptable and context-sensitive moral agents, fitting seamlessly with AI's new data-driven, bottom-up approach.

Virtue Monism: Drawing from Socratic virtue ethics, this principle centers on the single virtue of practical wisdom (phronesis), proposing that all other virtues are manifestations of this core virtue. In AI, modeling phronesis (instead of a myriad of individual virtues) involves equipping systems with the ability to make prudent decisions based on context, experience, and moral understanding and navigate complex ethical landscapes by applying learned experiences to new situations.

Phronesis as a Set of Skills: In line with the Aretai model, it can be argued that practical wisdom should be understood as a set of skills, including moral perception, moral deliberation, moral motivation, and emotion regulation. Since AI does not (yet?) have emotions, I will suggest that the first three skills provide a strong foundation for artificial wisdom.

Combining Ethical Particularism, Virtue Monism, and Phronesis as skills could provide a promising framework for developing ethical AI systems. By focusing on context-specific decision-making and cultivating practical reasoning, AI can be designed to handle ethical dilemmas more effectively. Of course, challenges remain in proving the adequacy of the Aretai model and in overcoming the computational problems of the ethical training of artificial systems.

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The Elimination of *Phronesis* in the Technological Development

Technological innovation is generating a profound anthropological and social transformation, redefining not only the concept of the human being but also the relationship between individuals and their surrounding environment. Since the dawn of civilization, humanity has sought to overcome the limitations imposed by nature, including mortality and biological constraints. Today, with advancements in fields such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology, these aspirations appear increasingly achievable. However, such developments raise fundamental ethical questions, challenging the centrality of *phronesis*, or prudence in action, that is, as Aristotle understands it, the ability to deliberate correctly on what is good and useful to lead a good and virtuous life.

In antiquity, *techne* was intrinsically linked to *phronesis*, yet in the contemporary paradigm, this connection seems to have been compromised. Modern technology operates under an implicit principle that whatever is technically feasible must necessarily be realized. In other words, technical feasibility appears to automatically legitimize action, regardless of prior ethical scrutiny (Tsai & Ku, 2024).

This paper argues for the urgent need to reintroduce *phronesis* as a cornerstone in technological development. A robust ethical framework cannot exist without an anthropological foundation that defines human identity and the direction of progress. Today,

it seems that humans no longer assign meaning to technology; rather, technology redefines human self-understanding, bypassing anthropological reflection and practical wisdom.

We are thus witnessing a reversal of the traditional epistemological framework: whereas for Aristotle, phronesis guided techne and sophia oriented episteme, today techne and episteme seem to govern action without a wisdom-based foundation (Solana, 2021). Technical and instrumental knowledge prevails over philosophical reflection, steering progress toward a post-human paradigm in which individuals emancipate themselves from natural limitations. It is therefore necessary to question both the ethical legitimacy and the long-term societal benefits of a technology devoid of phronesis. Before applying technological advancements, we must first understand who we are and where we intend to go.

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Practical Reason and Practical Wisdom

The recent literature on *phronesis* has shed some much-appreciated light on the concept. The Aristotelian tradition broadly agrees on the central role of *phronesis* as the highest individual virtue, which, when attained, signifies that a person deserves to be considered excellent. While *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue, it is viewed as equivalent to moral virtue in its fullest sense, representing the mature expression of all the distinct moral virtues. This Nicomachean Ethics-based understanding of individual *phronesis* is broadly accepted, with minor differences regarding the nature of the transition from single virtues to *phronesis*. Some interpretations favour a distinction between token and type (e.g., De Caro et al., 2021), others propose a relationship of virtualisation and actualisation (e.g., Darnell et al., 2019, Hacker-Wright 2023), and still others emphasise a dynamic between practices and cross-practice considerations (e.g., MacIntyre 2016).

In terms of moral development, two models stand out in particular: the Jubilee Centre model (e.g., Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2022) and the Aretai model (De Caro, Navarini & Vaccarezza 2024). The Jubilee centre maintains that we must get habituated into the individual virtues first and then, eventually, *phronesis* will emerge, as a sort of synergy, balance, and rational weighing of the individual virtues. There is thus a logical distinctness between the virtues and *phronesis*, *phronesis* being only the latter stage of virtue development. By contrast, the Aretai model suggests that

such a dichotomy is implausible and that we should postulate the existence of *phronesis* from the start, as the core or *ratio essendi* of the singular virtues. In this presentation, I will make use of recent developments in neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism along the line of Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness* to argue that the discrepancy between the two accounts is not as big as it seems when we take into account the intricate nexus between our human life form, our distinctive form of self-knowledge (knowledge of our life form), practical reason, and practical wisdom, though some educational discrepancies remain.

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Pass the Phronesis - a Seasoning for the Undergraduate Medical Curriculum

Undergraduate medical education has long used evidence-based, engaging techniques such as reflective practice, simulations, and direct patient contact to develop competent and ethically-grounded healthcare professionals. However, even early-years students are burning out (Prendergast M et al. 2024), and graduating students are not always prepared for the active realities of practice (Monrouxe LV et al. 2018).

Phronesis is contextual, deliberative, adjudicatory virtue resulting in action and leading to flourishing. It is necessary in medical practice (Plews-Ogan, M, Sharpe, KE. 2022) but there are challenges in conceptualising and applying it to medical education. Further, the medical curriculum is already crowded and there are political calls to compress it further.

Instead of adding a new concept to the curriculum, I propose using the lens of phronesis — focused on context-sensitive judgment in the complex real world — to enhance the effectiveness of existing educational strategies and support students through their learning more successfully and more kindly. Phronesis would act as a seasoning rather than a new ingredient.

Reflective practice changes from what students have described as a “zombie” exercise (de la Croix A, Veen M. , 2018) into a transformative experience through which students develop their professional identity and find joy amongst the challenge of their work.

Clinical decision-making simulations could move from memorising heuristics to leveraging metacognition in the moment to make more nuanced plans with patients. Patient interviews could be combined with narrative enquiry to deepen meaning-making for students, patients, and teachers. Academic coaching programs could provide role modelling for a compassionate, culturally competent, and transdisciplinary approach to practice.

In summary, applying a lens of phronesis to existing medical educational strategies could be a situationally-appropriate and palatable way to not add further burden to the curriculum, while preparing students for the profession and supporting their wellbeing in it.

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Contemplative Wisdom as a Guide for Prudence: Aquinas's Perspective

One of the characteristics of the new Neo-Aristotelian Phronesis Model proposed by Kristjánsson and Fowers is that it suspends Aristotle's claim that contemplative wisdom (*sophia*) holds primacy over practical wisdom (*phronesis*). In this paper, I aim to show how, according to Thomas Aquinas, contemplative wisdom can serve as a guide for the *phronimos*.

In his teaching on prudence, Aquinas largely draws on Aristotle. However, beyond his specifically Christian theological perspective, Aquinas adds an integrating metaphysical scope to Aristotle's moral philosophy, which can be noticed in the beginning of his commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and other works.

According to Aquinas, foundations of practical reason are aligned with, confirmed by, and in a way even gathered from nature. Prudence, the equivalent of Aristotelian *phronesis* in Aquinas's teachings, requires an apprehension of the notion of the good and the ends of virtues gleaned from patterns of agency of natural and virtuous moral agents that serve as exemplars for emulation by the *phronimos*. For Aquinas, the apprehension of the first lights of prudence pertains to the natural habit of understanding practical principles - *synderesis*. Contemplation, however, not only allows the *phronimos* to identify those foundational lights of prudence better. It also verifies their alignment with what good agency entails. It pertains to contemplative wisdom to verify, clarify, and

deepen the understanding of the first guiding lights of prudence and the ends of moral virtue to be pursued by the prudent person. Prudence would remain blind concerning its virtuous ends if it were detached from some insight into the exemplary patterns of good agency manifest in nature and through other moral agents aligned with those patterns. Thus, contemplative wisdom maintains primacy over prudence insofar as it evaluates, confirms, and enhances these insights into the virtuous goods which are to be pursued by prudence.

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Phronesis and Practical Knowledge of the Human Good in Foot and Thompson

Philippa Foot challenges the assumption that rationality in moral contexts requires maximizing good states of affairs, advocating instead for an Aristotelian perspective that equates rationality with acting well, as defined by practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). For Foot, practical rationality is rooted in the human form of life, where responding to moral considerations, self-interest, desire-fulfillment, and partiality are equally fundamental aspects of human rationality. I argue here that knowing what reasons we have involves knowledge of our form of life in a distinctively practical register. Michael Thompson's work on practices and dispositions helps clarify the form this understanding takes as distinct from theoretical knowledge and other kinds of practical knowledge. Thompson outlines a narrow conception of dispositions that are practical in form, that are individuated by their irreducible orientation to the good. The reasoning and actions of the practically wise agent reflect an understanding of the human good that is practical in form and therefore cannot be spelled out in any theoretical specification or identified with practical states that are specifiable in ways that do not appeal to goodness. Thompson's conception of practical knowledge yields a more satisfactory understanding of the appeal to knowledge of the human form of life in Foot's ethical naturalism.

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Cultivating Desires Through Practical Wisdom

Aristotle famously argues that the virtues of character are unified through phronesis – if a person possesses practical wisdom in the complete sense, they also possess the excellent character traits of temperance, courage and friendliness (EN, Book XI). This means that there is an intimate link between a virtuous person's capacities for reasoning and deliberation and their appetitive and emotional inclinations. Developing practical wisdom is dependent on cultivating your desires and vice versa. But how this process is conceived of is subject to much dispute.

In this paper, I review some recent psychological literature on self-control to sketch out a picture of the process of habituation that can tell us how employing practical wisdom can cultivate emotional and appetitive development.

Recent studies have shown that people with high trait self-control rarely must exercise state self-control, understood as momentary effortful inhibition of impulses (Hofman et al, 2012). Instead, they have cultivated beneficial habits that automatize the behavior they desire (De Ridder et. al., 2012). I argue that the automatization of beneficial behavior through cultivating habits is the essence of acquiring virtue and consider some of the best strategies for this process found in the psychological literature. Duckworth et al. (2015) have mapped out a taxonomy of the various strategies that can be used to successfully pursue higher valued goals that go beyond moment-to-moment impulse suppression, leading them

to posit five ‘families’ divided into two groups – three intrapsychic strategies and two situational strategies.

I go through these strategies and argue that employing them should be considered a key component of using practical wisdom to cultivate desires, as the research shows that once a habit is formed, your desires start aligning with your rational judgments (Milyavskaya and Inzlicht, 2015; Gillebaart, Denise & de Ridder, 2015; Stojanovic & Wood, 2025).

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Rethinking Emulation: Why Zagzebski's Account of Admiration Falls Short as a Moral Developmental Theory

If cultivating *phronesis* – broadly understood as excellence in ethical decision making – and the related moral virtues is a central aim of neo-Aristotelian character education, then, in this context, it follows that the aim of a moral developmental theory is to explain, step-by-step, how one acquires *phronesis* and moral virtue from infancy to moral maturity. Emulation has become an increasingly prominent way of acquiring said traits, with scholars championing it as *a*, maybe even *the*, primary method of virtuous character development. Yet there remains some debate as to precisely what emulation is, conceptually speaking, and how it might work as a methodological process, and in this theoretical quagmire Linda Zagzebski's account – which focuses on the *admiration* of exemplars – has reigned strong. Despite its various merits, in this paper, I challenge its continued status as an overarching moral developmental theory of emulation. I argue that it is time for the philosophical tide to (re-)turn to emulation *qua* role modelling and reconsider its overreliance on Zagzebski's theory of admiration *qua* exemplarism, which arguably misses the mark in explaining how we acquire the full spectrum of moral virtue and *phronesis*. Specifically, I suggest that *as a moral developmental method* Zagzebski's theory of admiration falls short on three important grounds – philosophical rigour, psychological realism and developmental adequacy – and advance three related objections. First,

that Zagzebski's understanding of admiration is philosophically incomplete because it rests on a misinterpretation of Aristotle's account of *zēlos* in *Rhetoric*; second, that her position is psychologically *unrealistic*, because even if one accepts her account of the *so called* 'emotion' of admiration, alone it is motivationally too simple to explain how learners acquire the full spectrum of moral virtue; and third, that – drawing upon the empirically supported neo-Aristotelian *Phronesis* Model which demonstrates the salience of *phronesis* to moral decision making – Zagzebski's theory of admiration is developmentally *inadequate* because, by omitting *phronesis* from its ethical repertoire, it cannot provide an account of how it develops. In response, I then propose a solution in the form of my own theory of emulation *qua* role modeling – a two-step psycho-moral process involving a new concept, entangled *phronesis*.

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Phronesis - From Conjecture & Concept to Consultations & Care

Phronesis should be conceived as a dynamic process rather than a static disposition or character trait. Mastering this process can be considered a skill, and reliably demonstrating phronesis can be viewed as a competence, albeit one that is challenging to assess.

This paper outlines the philosophical reasoning behind these statements, drawing from doctoral empirical research to explore the characteristics that define a wise doctor. These collective attributes contribute towards a purposeful goal. The discussion introduces the novel “Fish School Theory” of practical wisdom, situating phronesis within the context of Aristotle’s concept of flourishing (eudaimonia).

Medicine traditionally operates on the level of positivistic bio-science and rules-based ethics. Thus, the re-emergence of virtue ethics underpinning medical practice is a welcome development. The core challenge lies in translating theoretical ideas and empirical findings into practical initiatives within medical education, fostering an environment where phronesis can thrive. Some of these ideas have been explored in the literature on Phronesis in Medicine and will be summarized. The paper will also discuss the excitement of innovation and the challenges of embedding education for phronesis within a Professionalism curriculum in a large undergraduate medical program in the UK.

The conclusion presents the interdisciplinary, informal Practical Wisdom Network, which aims to facilitate collaboration and advance the knowledge translation of phronesis.

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Is There a Zetetic Wisdom?

The recent surge of wisdom studies, spanning psychology, pedagogy, and philosophy, has predominantly focused on practical wisdom. While a few exceptions exist (Baehr 2014), theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) has usually been integrated with a broader concept of wisdom (Ryan 2012) rather than being treated as a distinct entity.

However, Zagzebski's (1996) classical argument for virtue epistemology posits that *phronesis* (classically a hybrid kind of virtue, both moral and intellectual) plays a crucial role also in the intellectual life of a virtuous individual. Thus, considering numerous challenges associated with inquiry, I propose an analysis of what could be termed 'zetetic' wisdom (Friedman 2020), specifically *phronesis* in the context of inquiry.

First, I define 'zetetic' wisdom as a skill. Then, I contrast it to a recent skill theory of practical wisdom (Tsai 2023), to draw disanalogies between moral and zetetic wisdom. Furthermore, I pose the question of whether zetetic wisdom alone can constitute a comprehensive account of theoretical wisdom. While it is plausible that a wise person should possess zetetic wisdom, I argue that it falls short of being a sufficient foundation on its own. This sheds light on the desiderata we should have for a satisfactory theory of *sophia*.

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Phronesis as a Human Biological Trait

The (Neo-)Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is often defined as a holistic and contextual meta-cognitive capacity that guides virtuous actions and facilitates the process of shaping a morally good, virtuous character. It is distinguished from more common accounts of wisdom by being firmly grounded in a moral domain due to its inextricable connection to agency.

Our understanding of *phronesis* will therefore depend on our understanding of the natural underpinnings of rationality, autonomy, and even free will, according to Aristotelian principle. As many Neo-Aristotelian accounts point out, the affective and somatic elements play a central role here. This, along with emerging theories of biological autonomy and embodied/embedded cognition, suggests turning toward the evolutionarily older instances of agential meta-capacities.

Recent studies on animal sentience suggest that affective states across different species may differ not only in intensity but also in kind. The fundamental qualities of how a fox experiences its existence might be composed of qualitatively different components than those of a lizard. Some of these sentient qualia may partially overlap, while others might be unique to a particular group, making them difficult to conceptualize from a human perspective.

The same could be said for estimative and conative qualities, especially if we accept the affective organismal character of conscious agency. Practical wisdom in humans – just like *vis estimativa* in

animals – becomes a unique combination of components, typical of the human way of being, acting, and making sense of the world of which we are an integral part.

The contextual and communitarian character of *phronesis* originates from the ecological embeddedness of animal agency. This kind of pre-moral biological teleology manifests itself in the human need for relationships and in a sense of belonging in the (natural) world (integral ecology). This has direct implications for phronesis-inspired ethics in the context of present social and ecological challenges.

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Practical Wisdom: Insights and Implications for Medical Practice

Practical wisdom entails purpose (telos), accurate perception of context, integration of ethical virtues and principles, deliberation, and motivation. It applies directly to the practice of medicine. As a purpose-directed virtue, practical wisdom is oriented toward goals of care, concepts of health, and human flourishing. As a context-engaging virtue, practical wisdom is perceptive of the dimensions of decision making, which include assessments of diagnoses, prognoses, and treatment burdens and probabilities pertaining to an individual patient. And as an ethics-integrating virtue, practical wisdom foregrounds moral agency and the need for conscientious practice by medical professionals. By bringing together purpose, context, and virtue ethics, practical wisdom illuminates the importance of shared decision making in health-care which respects both patients and professionals as persons, especially in morally pluralistic societies when the patient's good is contested.

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Phronesis: New developments in Theory and Measurement

This presentation explains the motivation behind the research work on phronesis (conceptual and empirical) in the Jubilee Centre from 2019 onwards. It describes our operationalization of phronesis and two attempts to create the first-ever measure of the construct: the Long Phronesis Measure and the Short Phronesis Measure. Some of the most recent findings from the latter instrument will be explained and explored.

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Aristotelian Moral Learning, Phronesis and Moral Machine Learning

In this paper, I examine the possibility that AI can attain moral intelligence via moral machine learning that imitates human moral learning (e.g. Railton (2020)). I adopt a broadly Aristotelian perspective on human developmental moral learning and compare how AI moral learning could proceed, given the differences in cognitive kind between AI and HI. As I argue, cognitive differences such as autonomous reason-responsiveness, conceptual understanding, affective experience and virtuous moral intuition hinder moral AI of learning in the distinctive human manner that can lead to the development of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.

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The Sophists' Challenge: Two Meanings of *Phronesis*

The paper analyses the issue of phronesis relation to the First Sophists of Ancient Greece by addressing two different meanings of the Greek term in question, conventionally understood as “practical reason” or “practical wisdom”. According to Josiah Ober’s complex analysis of the realm of “practical reason” from his 2022 book *The Greeks and the Rational*, by surveying Ancient Greek philosophical, historical and literary sources we may differentiate between two major meanings of “practical reasoning”, as phronesis may be better understood in terms of a process. The first meaning of practical reason, Ober argues, is as ‘instrumental’ (‘means to end’) reason. This understanding of practical reason as instrumental, means-to-end, reason, yet not constrained by moral reservations, opens the floor to a broad reading of phronesis extant in various ancient sources, including theatre, rhetorical speeches, economics, history, law, and, finally, moral philosophy. According to the same author, the second major understanding of practical reasoning, seen here in general as a whole process of decision-making with the final aim of action, comprising an entire set of ‘motivations for action’, from ‘desires’ and ‘beliefs’ to the analysis of ‘expectations’ in order to make ‘deliberate choices’ generally regulated by ‘self-interest’, is as a ‘means to an end’ yet ‘moral’ - i.e. in pursuit of a moral end with the help of virtuous means - reasoning. This second reading of phronesis as practical reasoning is attributable to the Socratic philosophers, particularly Plato and

Aristotle. It is known that Aristotle's writings basically establish the conventional philosophical meaning of phronesis. However, the discovery of phronesis as basic instrumental reasoning, in the first meaning of the term mentioned above, may be attributed to the First Sophists in general. Our paper will try to argue for this hypothesis with examples from various fragments (particularly from Plato's dialogues). The final part of our presentation will discuss Protagoras' presentation of practical reasoning as a justifiable, rational, not narrowly self-interested and self-evident strategy of social 'cooperation' as described by Plato's dialogue Protagoras.

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Ross on Phronesis and Common-Sense Morality

Aim of my talk is that of showing how the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* plays a background role in W.D. Ross' metaethical theory of *prima facie* duty, as it is expressed in Ross' masterpiece *The Right and the Good* (1930). In the first part of the talk, I illustrate Ross' theory of *prima facie* duties, dwelling upon the relationship between *prima facie* duties and actual duties. Particularly, I focus on the role of practical deliberation through which moral agents determine, upon appropriate reflection, what is their actual duty. Such deliberation can be subsumed as a case of *phronesis*. Although Ross emphatically claims that the right act is a fortunate act, I argue that in doing what is good moral agents are not left alone at the mercy of luck. In fact, moral agents do not exercise their judgement in abstract, but because of a practice of moral deliberation refined through education. Accordingly, Ross argues that the *data* of ethics are "the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people". In the second part, I argue that common sense morality bears a sort of *practical wisdom*. Ross often explicitly appeals to what common men think to support his theoretical claims and argues that the main moral convictions of plain men are knowledge from the beginning. This does not lead to a conservative stance, however. Not every moral conviction constitutes knowledge, but only those convictions that express *prima facie* duty. Ross conceives such convictions in terms of self-evident propositions. Those convictions, that plain men can

grasp upon reflection on acts, constitute a moral heritage through which moral progress itself is made possible. Common men, as well as wise men, have only to draw on this heritage to exercise *phronesis* at best.

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Ethos and Phronesis: What Relationships Between Them?

The claim put forward in this paper is that if there is a special relationship between phronesis and *ethos* taken as individual character, some relationship must also be established between phronesis and *ethos* as “a set of values, norms and codes of conduct that, once interiorised, constitute the dispositions character and cultural temperament of a certain segment of the population”, what we may call the Hegelian sense of ethos. The first relationship is surely established in the *Rhetoric* where Aristotle argues in favour of a mutual interdependence between *logos* and *ethos* because it takes character to reason well and intelligence to pursue good ends. If we translate *logos* into the practical sphere of action as phronesis, we can understand how the relationship between *logos* and *ethos* is very similar to the relationship between phronesis and character.

Can the Hegelian collective sense of ethos be entirely not aligned with that relationship? In other words, shouldn't we imagine a strict relationship also between phronesis and the Hegelian sense of ethos? I want to inquire into the ways in which societal ethos can go right through the influence of phronesis or, on the opposite, can go wrong because deviated by several factors. In the first range of factors which make societal ethos go right we can list education through family ethos and school ethos when these are correctly addressed by the families and by school principals and teachers. Also, intellectuals can have a positive role with respect to

societal ethos, teaching elements of phronesis and virtues, though the latter tend to be neglected in contemporary society, while the former is often confused with technical competence.

However, it is the second range of factors that should mostly attract our concern because societal ethos can easily divorce from phronesis in contemporary society in which confusion about worthy aims of conduct is so common. If we only think about the persuasive power of the visual media that each of us – and especially the young people – use so many times per day, we can start to grasp the difficulty of compensating the consumeristic and empty messages by which we are bombarded every day. In general terms the conception(s) of the good conveyed by these media rotate around desire satisfaction, whatever the desires we happen to have. They propose all sorts of images, with little filter or distinction even in the case of children and young people.

If phronesis and virtues are largely neglected in the shaping of ethos, it is difficult to see where to search for measures of compensation and difficult to search for grounds of ‘civic ethos’. Can this be based entirely on learning the basis of the rule of law and constitutional principles, as some scholars hold?

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Towards a Consequentialist Form of *Phronesis*

Although the notion of *phronesis* remains one of the most widely studied ethical concepts, it has not received much attention in the consequentialist tradition (with notable exceptions, such as Driver 2003). In this paper, I argue for a new form of consequentialist *phronesis* understood as a disposition to perceive as salient situations meriting moral deliberation.

My approach brings together emerging forms of sophisticated consequentialism and recent developments in the psychology and philosophy of attention and salience. In consequentialism, it becomes increasingly popular to adopt a *partially self-effacing* motivational structure, where consequentialist deliberation is removed from our consciousness, and we act on non-consequentialist dispositions in everyday life (Pettit 2012, Railton 1984). However, this structure assumes a separate disposition to spot the situations where these automatic dispositions lead us astray, and where a consequentialist deliberation is in order. I argue that this disposition is best modelled with philosophy and psychology of attention and salience (Archer 2022, Lien et al. 2008, Whiteley 2022). What a consequentialist necessarily needs is a reliable tendency to spot morally relevant situations understood as those meriting stepping back from our everyday action patterns and engaging in consequentialist deliberation. This disposition, I argue, should be understood as a consequentialist *phronesis*, as it is a form of practical knowledge helping us choose the right response

in particular situations, adjudicating between other dispositions and consequentialist reasoning. On this reading, consequentialist *phronesis* is akin to the interpretations of the Aristotelian notion viewing it as a form of perception (see Noel 1999), bearing also important resemblance to influential modern Aristotelian views (Kristjánsson et al. 2021). Finally, based on psychological and philosophical research (Quin et al. 2021, Rumbaugh et al. 2012, Munton 2021), I argue that this practical wisdom should be trained by a form of conditioning based on model examples.

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The Relationship Between Phronesis and “The Virtues”

The Aretai model of practical wisdom sees *phronesis* as an ethical expertise that encompasses all the virtues. In several articles we have argued that *phronesis* can be understood as the *ratio essendi* of the virtues, while the virtues can be understood as the *ratio cognoscendi* of practical wisdom (De Caro et al., 2021; 2024; 2025).

This paper expands on the relationship between *phronesis* and the virtues and addresses some objections to the monistic view of the model. These include (1) whether people develop some virtues before practical wisdom (McLoughlin et al., 2025; Hacker Wright, 2024); (2) whether agents develop multiple “role-virtues” (Swanton, 2019; Curzer, 2024); and (3) whether neuroempirical studies suggest different brain areas for different virtues (Han, 2024).

Against (1), we argue that individuals typically possess a general virtuous capacity rather than isolated traits. While one may excel in some virtues more than in others, *phronesis* remains a unifying ethical expertise that helps navigate different situations. On (2), we argue that virtue is generally present in all aspects of life, with apparent gaps explained by factors such as contextual preference, *in fieri* stages of virtue development, episodic inconsistency, or the complexity and novelty of situations. Finally, we respond to

(3) by suggesting that phronesis functions as a unified expertise, eventually activating multiple brain circuits while maintaining its coherence.

In conclusion, we propose that virtue should be viewed as a flexible, unified ethical expertise that allows for varying degrees of virtue in different situations. We also propose that virtue development is holistic, involving moral reasoning, perception, motivation, and emotional regulation (Niccoli et al., 2024). We therefore advocate for educational programs that treat virtuousness/phronesis as an integrated whole.

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The Moral Virtue of Forgiveness

The paper examines forgiveness as a response to wrongdoing in moral relationships, highlighting its nature and role in repairing damaged relationships (Norlock, 2022). When conceived as a moral virtue, independently from any religious connotation, forgiveness constitutes a deliberation's process that entails a reassessment of one's values and moral commitments. Through a comparative analysis of contemporary virtue ethics approaches to the issue (Pettigrove, 2023), and selected studies in moral psychology —particularly those by Freedman (2025) and Song *et al.* (2025) — the paper illustrates how forgiveness can contribute to the moral character development of both the forgiver and the forgiven, fostering empathy even when undeserved and affirming the recognition of the other's dignity. The discussion further extends to the connection between forgiveness and the recent debate on restorative justice (Suzuki & Jenkins, 2024; Scholl & Townsend, 2024), which considers forgiveness in its various forms as a possible outcome rather than a necessary requirement. Ultimately, forgiveness emerges from an ongoing reflection on one's moral responsibilities and the possibility of transforming one's response to wrongdoing. Its complexity and significance lie in its dual nature: on the one hand, it can serve as an acknowledgment of shared human vulnerability in the face of harm; on the other, it remains a moral choice namely an emergent value of restorative justice (Fiddes, 2016) and a supererogatory act (Grigoletto, 2019) that, by virtue of its very nature, can, in certain circumstances, be justifiably withheld.

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The Trajectory of Phronesis: The Evolution and Contemporary Relevance of Phronesis

The development of phronesis has not followed a linear trajectory. Instead, it has evolved, shaped by the philosophical and ethical contexts of each era. Thinkers from various periods after Aristotle have emphasized different aspects of phronesis, reflecting the concerns of their time. For instance, Aquinas highlighted its divine nature through the lens of natural law and God's providentia, Vico connected it to rhetoric with his notions of *eloquentia* and *ingenium*, while Smith grounded it in economics, focusing on personal interest and self-command. When analyzing the history of phronesis, it becomes clear that various authors have concentrated on different facets of the concept. Examples include the distinction between *kathekonta* and *katorthomata* in Stoic philosophy, Vico's focus on *ars topica*, and Smith's idea of the impartial spectator. These diverse interpretations provide valuable insights that can deepen our understanding of the phronesis of our own time.

Contemporary notions of phronesis reflect the complexities of the modern world. Two key trends are especially prominent: the partialization and professionalization of phronesis, and the increasing drive to quantify it. Today, phronesis is often seen as a response to contemporary ethical and psychological challenges. It functions in various roles, including as a form of moral mindfulness, moral resilience, a guide for moral distress, a compass for purpose-driven action, and a source of moral empathy. These dual

facets—one rooted in scientific rigor, the other addressing ethical and psychological vulnerabilities—serve as crucial descriptors of contemporary phronesis. A meta-analysis of both these dimensions not only enhances our understanding of modern phronesis but also provides insights into how phronesis can be harnessed to address and potentially transform the challenges of our time.

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Using Phronesis to Create Trust in Autonomous Technology

One of the fundamental theses of classical philosophy of artificial intelligence is the belief that issues such as bias, hallucination, outdated or irrelevant training data, privacy concerns, intellectual property concerns, deepfakes, lack of transparency, black box issues, job displacement, training costs, concentration of power, carbon footprint, and trust in technology can only be deliberated from a transcendental perspective. This perspective is based on the distinction between intelligence-mind and wisdom-reason.

Thus, the intelligence embodied in human-assisting robotic technology is incapable of reaching the human level of ethics—the level of *phronesis* (wisdom)—which is reserved for beings driven by goals and values, operating in the realm of freedom. This claim serves as one of the fundamental reasons for the belief that trust or distrust in emerging human-assisting robotic technology can only be determined from the perspective of fully ethical agents, i.e., humans. Machines, by contrast, can only attain the level of explicit ethical agents (Moore, 2006) because they permanently retain the status of “ethical zombies” (Véliz, 2021).

The objective of my talk will be to present the initial results of an ongoing research project aimed at answering the question of how emerging human-assisting embodied robots can be equipped with a system that simulates the attitudes and moral values of their users using contemporary methods of digital humanities.

This project directly relates to the findings of the Moral Machine research (Awada et al., 2018) and addresses the problem of employing culturally clustered ethics (*phronesis*) as a response to the issue of trust in autonomous machines. This objective is pursued with reference to the hybrid approach to ethics proposed by Wallach, Smit, and Allen (Wallach, Smit, & Allen, 2004). Their concept is based on the claim that an index of trust in social machines—and thus their classification as “Friends” within Ihde’s triad of Friend, Alien, and Foe—can be achieved when the personal and local ethical preferences of technology users (*phronesis*) are considered in the machines’ decision-making processes.

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The Role of Metacognitive Flexibility in Wise Reasoning

In this talk, I introduce *metacognitive flexibility* as a key element of wise reasoning, as illustrated in the context of political epistemology. I define metacognitive flexibility as the set of knowledge and dispositions that enable individuals to judiciously balance epistemic and non-epistemic considerations when deploying context-sensitive cognitive strategies.

To illustrate its significance, I address Michael Hannon's *dilemma of political objectivity* (1), which highlights a tension between political knowledge and its presumed epistemic harms. Hannon argues that political knowledge correlates with polarization, bias, and dogmatism (2–4), yet its presumed remedy—objectivity—risks leading to political apathy. Thus, democratic citizens appear trapped between bias and disengagement, raising the question of how to navigate this epistemic conundrum.

My proposal for a way out of this conundrum is metacognitive flexibility. As I understand it, metacognitive flexibility involves, on the one hand, the understanding that one's identity and circumstances often influence one's attitudes and intake of evidence and, on the other hand, the capacity to adaptively choose cognitive strategies that promote either accuracy or engagement, pending on the circumstances of one's context. A metacognitively flexible citizen adaptively uses their cognition to avoid harmful falsehoods in contexts in which accuracy is key (specific to deliberative democracy), while at the same time maintaining their political

pathos in contexts in which political engagement is key (specific to participatory democracy).

I further explore how metacognitive flexibility connects to practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Recent research on phronesis highlights its context-sensitive, integrative, and adaptive nature (5–7), involving many of the same cognitive mechanisms that support metacognitive flexibility. Given its role in balancing accuracy and adaptability (8,9), phronesis may provide a broader normative framework for understanding how metacognitive flexibility contributes to wise reasoning in political life (10–12).

By drawing this connection, I aim to show that metacognitive flexibility is not merely a cognitive skill but a phronetic capacity, essential for navigating the epistemic challenges of democratic life while maintaining both intellectual responsibility and civic engagement.

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*Can Machines Truly Be Wise?
An Exploration of AI and Human Wisdom*

The presentation explores whether machines can possess wisdom. With instant access to vast philosophical, ethical, psychological, and scientific literature, machines might seem to be able to surpass human cognitive capabilities. This impression is reinforced by recent AI chatbots providing insightful answers to profound questions about the meaning of life, God, death, or other philosophical issues. A good example of AI's philosophical engagement is the book *The Inner Life of an AI: A Memoir by ChatGPT*.

A key element of my argument is that, although AI machines use language with remarkable sophistication, they remain Searlian „Chinese rooms,” lacking the essential component of wisdom: understanding. They also seem to be lacking another crucial ability: value sensitivity. For this reason, wisdom (either as sophia or phronesis) is still beyond the reach of machines. However, this does not prevent them from being valuable tools that might assist humans in developing wisdom.

I will begin by describing how large language models (LLMs) achieve impressive features in answering deep philosophical questions. I will then analyze the concept of wisdom, focusing on understanding and sensitivity to values—epistemic or moral—essential to wisdom. I will argue that AI machines lack these abilities, and therefore cannot be wise. Finally, I will discuss how AI can still serve as valuable tools in guiding us on our journey toward wisdom.

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Dependent Practical Wisdom: The Value of Dependency in Environmental Ethics

Aristotle's notion of phronesis was first introduced in Japan in the 1860s. Since then, Japanese philosophers and their society have struggled to harmonise Aristotelian and their moral values. However, it remains uncertain how the notion of phronesis is related to the Japanese perception of nature. In this presentation, I examine some topics in environmental ethics and argue that reconsidering the value of depending on nature as an aspect of phronesis will restore a good relationship between humans and nature.

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Emotional Justification of Certitude

This paper explores the cognitive role of *phronesis* considering John Henry Newman's epistemology. I claim the emotion of certitude which is associated to the illative sense (Newman's conceptualization of cognitive operations of *phronesis*) can provide emotional justification for beliefs.

My analysis examines whether emotions can provide a legitimate form of justification in the context of certitude — the culmination of *phronesis*' cognitive operation. I argue for two modes of emotionally shaped justification: (1) *initial pre-reflective justification*, where emotions serve as an early cognitive-practical orientation toward truth; and (2) *second-order confirmatory justification*, in which the feeling of certitude supplied by the illative sense plays a crucial role. This latter function is controversial, as it suggests that emotions do not merely accompany, but contribute to the justification of belief.

Furthermore, I explore how the intellectual and moral dimensions of *phronesis* become increasingly intertwined when decisions of greater existential or ethical weight demand a higher quality of knowledge. I show how the positive motivational role of the feeling of certitude (satisfaction and motivation for truth) and its negative counterpart (repose after uncertainty) point to the necessity of emotions in completing the formal operations of the mind. This paper argues that *phronesis*, understood through Newman's illative sense, provides a model of epistemic justification that is both

rational and affective, challenging the traditional boundaries between cognition and emotion in knowledge formation and may be fruitfully exploited in decision-making functioning of *phronesis*.

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Ethical and Epistemic Virtue in Construction Engineering

This talk will focus on phronesis in practice, specifically its relevance to the ethics and epistemology of engineering. The focus will be construction engineering, which includes both large-scale infrastructure (such as bridges, underground systems and railroad lines) and major residential and civic buildings (such as high-rise apartment blocks, hospitals, schools and recreation centres). Many of the points however are intended to generalise to other forms of engineering.

The work presented is a collaboration between a professional academic philosopher and senior industry figures in construction and fire safety engineering. The immediate impetus for the project was the Grenfell Tower Fire in London in 2017, where what should have been a small fire contained to one flat in the building instead spread to the exterior of the building and, eventually, to full burn-out of the structure and 72 fatalities. The post-fire investigation revealed huge system failures in the construction engineering industry, in the global system of product testing, manufacturing and marketing, and in the transnational regulatory regimes governing construction and construction products. Importantly, the failures were not only moral but epistemic.

The talk will outline this research, the overall objective of which is both intellectual and practical. Intellectually, it is to better understand the virtue-theoretic nature of engineering as a moral and epistemic practice. Practically, it is to make available to industry

a rational and robust explanation of engineering as a virtue-centred practice, to give value to this conception of engineering, and to increase this idea's currency and weight in debates about what engineering is, how it (and its governance and leadership) might be changed, how it should be taught and evaluated, and how engineering (and specifically the contributions of engineers) should be integrated into broader societal and business-led activity. The talk will proceed via several vignettes, which will be used to illustrate how a virtue-theoretic conception of engineering will both deepen our understanding of engineering and improve engineering practice.

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Flourishing in the Abyss – Existential Phronesis

In this paper I argue for an expanded definition of flourishing (or *eudaimonia*) as defined by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that takes account of both authenticity and the individual's aim of creating a subjective sense of meaning in life. This is done by exploring potential virtues, hereafter referred to as 'existential virtues' which are more aptly suited to achieving these ultimate ends than the virtues identified by Aristotle. The main aim of this research is to contribute to the development of coping methods for mental ill-health, specifically common conditions such as depression and generalised anxiety disorder. Within the context of these alternative virtues, I present *phronesis* as a disposition, as these virtues focus on the attitude one might take, as opposed to the actions, and thus fall into the broad categorisation of intellectual or epistemological virtues. I also turn to existential 'heroes of authenticity' as moral exemplars within this context.

These existential virtues are posited using Zagzebski's framework of the distinctive properties of virtues which include '1. Being an acquired excellence of a person in a deep and lasting sense, 2. Being acquired by a process that involved a certain amount of time and effort, 3. Being distinct from a skill 4. Having a motivational component and 5. Having a success component' (see Zagzebski, 1996).

These virtues are drawn from themes within existentialism and include:

- dread/anxiety (to demonstrate how we feel connected to things that we deem important),
- uncertainty (by means of encountering new knowledge and having an openness towards things that we do not understand)
- boredom (as a motivator to find more fulfilling tasks and duties and thereby meaningfulness)
- Alienation (as a raw reminder that we are individuals, with a responsibility to ourselves to retain autonomy concerning how we interact with our environment).

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The Limits of Virtuous Man: Phronesis & Survival

While phronesis enables one to attain virtue through experience, it fails when moral judgement leads to actions that jeopardize survival. Taking, for instance, forgiveness and Thomas Aquinas' Divine Forgiveness, I assert phronesis—at times—necessitates withholding forgiveness when offering it would place the forgiver at risk for harm, death, or destruction. A virtuous act, such as staying with an abuser under moral duty, could cause harm or destruction, thus qualifying the act as 'an excess of courage' and thereby no longer being virtuous; Divine Forgiveness presents itself as a paradox not only because it is given only for the benefit of the offender, but it necessitates extending it at the risk of survival for the one offended, making it incompatible with phronesis. Because of the excess behavior, Divine Forgiveness places attaining virtue out of the scope of the golden mean, thereby highlighting the limits of a virtuous man if he incorporates it.

While a substantial amount of work defends phronesis as being a guide to morally appropriate action, this paper argues it cannot be exercised as Aristotle intended during states of social system dysfunction—like anomie. In states of anomie, survival instinct is prioritized over moral reasoning. This paper asserts that, in extreme conditions like anomie, phronesis is insufficient for guiding virtuous actions and the concept of Divine Forgiveness challenges the limits of practical wisdom.

Aristotle's framework still stands today as it did before; phronesis is a privileged virtue as moral reasoning does not function as a primary means of action for the virtuous man during the breakdown of social stability and other crisis states, thereby failing in extreme conditions as it cannot incorporate Divine forgiveness and align with practical wisdom. Survival instinct, not moral—nor practical—wisdom—dictates our action.

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Prudence Informed by Tragedy

Reason (in the sense of German *Vernunft*) may be conceived as an expression of deep wisdom concerning broken human nature, torn by multiple contradictions, and volatile, unpredictable life, exposed to manifold liabilities and dangers. Prudent is someone who experienced the moment of dread invading her life, who has been informed and let herself be taught by inexorable fate. This kind of practical reason finds its expression in antic tragedy (tragic wisdom). Tragicality casts doubt on our capabilities of consideration and understanding. Prudence informed by tragicness (leading from *phronein* to *phronesis*) becomes wisdom which does not provide us with any unambiguous, constructive knowledge; it is rather incommunicable cognition of what can be done in the face of value conflicts and who we are when confronted with dread of life and death. This wisdom enables us to conceive how miserable is human capability of action and prediction, how provisional and fragile is individual identity and integrality, as well as identity and integrality of our states and societies. Conflicts and dramatic choices are an important part of life (Ricoeur). The world of values is not harmonious and homogenous; therefore, there is no life without loss (Berlin, Kołakowski). Prudence is tinged with bitter awareness that often it comes too late – some lessons are useless; some medicines cannot cure. This does not result from cognitive failure or from triumph of passions over reason but makes part of usual human condition (Arendt) and is tangible

proof of our inescapable misery. Prudence informed by tragedy is recognition of this situation (disillusion). Its bitter truth, once revealed, makes us view reality differently; we become someone different. In literature this experience is referred to as “crossing the shadow-line”.

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