

Phronesis (Practical Wisdom) and *Philia* (Friendship)

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Abstract: In Aristotle's ethics, friendship is a complex and nuanced construct, which he termed *philia*. Aristotle's *philia* is much broader than affinity-based peer relationships, as friendship is often conceived currently. He identified three types of friendship (utility, pleasure, and character), and he devoted approximately 20% of the Nicomachean Ethics to friendship. This is because close personal relationships and developing oneself as a character friend are extremely important to living well as a human. This centrality makes character or virtue friendship distinctive and highly valuable. We apply the construct of *phronesis* to *philia* to reveal important aspects of both. First, we argue that situations common to character friendships highlight the reasonable limits of the emotion regulation function of *phronesis* in resolving seemingly intractable ethical conflicts. Second, we suggest that these limits suggest, counterintuitively, that character friendships (even among the most virtuous actors) are still subject, under some conditions, to substantial feelings of conflict and emotional ambivalence.

Keywords: Phronesis, practical wisdom, philia, friendship, neo-Aristotelian.

1 Introduction

In this article, we review two Aristotelean concepts: *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, and *philia*, or friendship. After introducing each concept, we consider what each can say about the other. The goal of this article is to suggest that Aristotelean ethical concepts can fruitfully interact to generate insights which were otherwise unavailable, as well as to highlight the complexity inherent in the many functions of *phronesis*.

2 Phronesis

Phronesis refers to the excellence of practical wisdom, an intellectual meta-virtue that organizes and orients ethical reasoning and action toward the best human ends and creates harmony among the virtues. *Phronesis* differs from Aristotle's other wisdom constructs of *sophia* (theoretical, abstract wisdom concerned with more metaphysical properties) and *deinotes* (an instrumentalist wisdom akin to the cleverness required to achieve a goal), and *phronesis* demands both concreteness as well as ethical discernment

(Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2022). *Phronesis* is a meta-virtue because it adjudicates between all other virtues rather than simply existing among them. An often-cited analogy for *phronesis* among the virtues is that of a musical conductor orchestrating a symphony of musicians to perform harmoniously (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2022). The tasks of *phronesis* are complex and varied, but they most vitally lead the *phronimos* (the practically wise individual) to ethical action based upon the deliberation about the relevant ethical features in the situation.

Multiple conceptualizations of wisdom have been offered, including MacIntyre's (1981) concept of *phronesis* as excellence of deliberation in human practices, Baltes and Staudinger's (2000) Berlin Model of wisdom as a motivational meta-heuristic, the postmodern notion of wisdom as individual subjective discretion omitting the moral component (Kemmis, 2012), Darnell et al. (2019) neo-Aristotelian model of *phronesis*, and Grossmann et al. (2020) Common Wisdom Model. These models attempt to delineate what wisdom is and how wise decision making occurs. These models of wisdom are also meant to facilitate its acquisition and cultivation. In this article, we rely on just one of these approaches, the Aristotelian Phronesis Model (Darnell et al., 2019, 2022; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024), which addresses virtue conflict resolutions and aspects of identity, and provides a multi-faceted approach addressing both reason and emotion, logic and motivation.

3 The Aristotelian Phronesis model (APM)

The APM is a four-component model clarifying how a *phronimos* would deliberate, arbitrate, and ultimately make decisions and act. We outline the four functions below.

3.1 The Constructive Function

This function allows an individual to perceive the ethically salient components of a situation to determine which virtues are relevant. In a circumstance involving risk, courage may be appropriate; in a situation focusing on resource disparity, justice may be appropriate. Knowing which virtues are salient to a situation allows the individual to select the action that best suits the circumstance. In the context of friendship, the *phronimos* must be able to identify the relevant virtues in concrete situations arising from the relationship. In practice this would entail recognizing that a situation calls for the virtue of compassion when a friend is in pain and the virtue of honesty when one is in possession of information which would benefit a friend.

3.2 The Integrative Function

This function builds upon the constitutive function by helping the *phronimos* to deliberate between more than one virtue that may be called for in a situation. To integrate virtues, one weighs the significance of the elements of a situation and deliberates about the best course of action for the situation. Based on the constitutive function, one is aware of the ethically salient components of a situation and the virtues which address these

components. Integration is also situation-specific, relying on input from the environment to guide decisions and actions.

The integrative function is necessary because some circumstances may call for more than one virtue and conflicts or disharmonies can arise. In these moments, the individual must adjudicate between the virtues to prioritize them relative to a specific situation in pursuing one path over another. In this way, an individual works to harmonize the virtues, which may involve prioritizing some virtues over others. Some ethically ambiguous situations pose difficulties and do not, *a priori*, present with clear ethical resolutions. When presenting a serious diagnosis, for example, physicians may have to choose between honesty and compassion, which may lead to honest compassion or compassionate honesty, depending on which virtue seems primary. Although the constitutive and integrative functions are necessary for *phronesis*, they are insufficient as neither explicitly incorporates motivation or ethicality. The motivational and ethical aspects of *phronesis* are addressed more fully in the blueprint and emotion regulation functions.

3.3 The Blueprint Function

This function focuses on an individual's understanding of what constitutes a good life. This function provides the motivational force of *phronesis*, because the vision of a good life creates approach motivation. The blueprint is not a precise picture of the good life, but rather the agent's best apprehension of that life, which is revised as greater clarity is attained through pursuing the aims of one's life as a whole (Darnell et al., 2019). When the *phronimos* utilizes the integrative function, their adjudication is informed by their understanding of the good life, and this allows the decision making to be guided by an ethical framework. Without this blueprint, it is difficult to understand how the constitutive function would operate, because it would become difficult for the *phronimos* to justify the selection of certain features of situations as particularly ethically salient.

3.4 The Emotional Regulation Function

This function refers to the metacognitive integration of emotion and cognition which helps to focus ethical decisions and actions. Current understandings of metacognition include cognition, emotion, and motivation, and focus on their harmonization. One way to see this is that all experiences include emotional and cognitive components, and each informs the other. Emotions are based on appraisals of situations, and emotion often helps to frame those appraisals. Reappraisal is a common way to alter one's cognitions and emotions about a situation when the initial appraisal generates inappropriate emotions or cognitions. Therefore, this function does not regulate emotion through suppression, control, or policing, but in an integrative manner wherein the two inform and direct each other (Darnell et al., 2019). This function facilitates virtuous actions, which are done spontaneously or willingly rather than forcibly undertaken in an effort to 'be good' (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson et al., 2021). When cognition is employed to control wayward emotions or desires, the agent is acting continently rather than virtuously

(Aristotle, 1985). This integration is partly definitive of full virtue, wherein virtuous actions are those which are consistent with the emotional desires of the *phronimos*.

4 Philia

Now that we have presented the APM approach to *phronesis*, we describe *philia*, with a focus on character friendship. Following the discussion of *philia*, we will consider a puzzle which emerges once *phronetic* reasoning is considered in the context of a character friendship.

Relationships are an essential component of virtually all human life. Naturally, then, good relationships are a central for Aristotle (1985), as he devotes two books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* – one fifth of the whole work – to a broad class of these relationships. Although his term *philia* is commonly translated as friendship, Aristotle uses the term to describe a broader set of relationships that includes not only the relationship between affinity-based friendships, but also between individuals such as colleagues, romantic partners, and family members (Fowers & Anderson, 2018). Therefore, Aristotle's *philia* expands and deepens the scope of what is commonly considered friendship. In contemporary terms, *philia* encompasses close relationships. With this caveat in mind, we will rely on the commonly used translation of *philia* as friendship within this paper.

Research on friendships indicate that positive relationships are tied to life satisfaction, hedonic well-being, positive affect across the lifespan, (e.g., Amati et al., 2018; Anderson & Fowers, 2020), as well as multifaceted measures of *eudaimonia* such as flourishing (e.g., Seligman, 2018; VanderWeele, 2017). Many scholars recognize the centrality of relating well with others to human welfare (e.g., Fowers, 2015).

Despite the documented importance of good relationships in cultures across the globe, the study of friendship in the social sciences is guided by two semi-hidden and value-laden perspectives of individualism and instrumentalism (Fowers & Anderson, 2018). The biases generated by these perspectives have been critiqued extensively both within and outside the social sciences (Fowers, 2012; Richardson et al., 1999; Taylor, 1989). By characterizing friendships as an exchange of mutual benefit between two parties, social scientists portray friendships as calculated instrumental relations pursued to attain individual goals. In addition, modern conceptualizations of friendships in the social science literature are defined as hedonic and pleasure-based, implying that friendships are often shallow and replaceable.

This is where Aristotle's conceptualization of *philia* is especially useful for departing from the ideological positions of individualism and instrumentalism. According to Aristotle, the three main types of *philia* are pleasure, utility, and virtue relationships (Aristotle, 1985). Utility friendships are based on the exchange of valued outcomes, which aligns strongly with the instrumentalist perspective of relationships in which friendships serve to advance individual aims. One could consider political allies trading favours to advance individual agendas as a prototypical example of this type of friendship. Pleasure friendships, in contrast, are characterized by the enjoyment experienced with a partner.

These affinity-based relationships align with both the prevailing individualism and instrumentalism perspectives in the literature by suggesting that individuals pursue friendships for the ultimate (instrumentalist) goal of personal pleasure (individualistic) (Fowers & Anderson, 2018). One could consider the enjoyment of a funny and entertaining friend as an example of a pleasure friendship.

Character friendships are the most complex form of friendship Aristotle outlined. Character friendships are limited in number because of the significant depth and intensity required to sustain them. Character friendships consist of admiration of a friend's good character and these friendships encourage both friends to live their lives in better ways (Hoyos Valdés, 2018). Character friends focus more on the well-being of the friend and the quality of the relationship itself than on hedonic satisfaction or utility. Virtue friendships involve a high degree of trust between partners and involve shared value commitments to worthwhile goals (e.g., fairness, education; Fowers & Anderson, 2018).

The idea that friendships that can be founded on more than pleasure or exchange is not unique to Aristotle. Clark and Aragon's (2013) communal orientation framework is a contemporary alternative to the dominant social exchange theory of friendships and partly reflects virtue friendship. Communal relationships are characterized by benefiting one another without expecting reciprocity. Individuals primed to expect a communal relationship with a stranger, as compared to a social exchange relationship, provided more beneficial attention and helping behaviours to the other person as well as fewer feelings of exploitation when support was not returned (Clark & Aragon, 2013). Research indicates that the communal orientation and the social exchange orientations can be dynamically activated in different relationships across different situations (Li & Fung, 2019).

With the concepts of *phronesis* and *philia* in hand, we investigate how the application of the *phronetic* concept to situations common to friendships sheds valuable light on both concepts.

5 Conclusion : Phronesis and Philia

To review, the four-function model of phronesis clarifies that the *phronimos* has a conception of an admirable and desirable way of life [blueprint], which allows her to identify the ethically relevant features of situations [constitutive], the ability to integrate those features [integrative], and then to connect these ethical intuitions to the proper motivational and emotional responses [emotion regulation] (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson et al., 2021).

Friendship refers to three types of relational configurations (utility, pleasure, and virtue), but we restrict our discussion to virtue-friendship, as discussed above. Aristotle (1985) clarifies that virtue friendship is not a friendship based solely on either pleasure or utility, but instead on mutual interest in one another's good. He notes that individuals engaging in character friendship are themselves virtuous, and so we can assume that character friendship often involves *phronesis*. Neo-Aristotelians assume that *phronesis* is a meta-

-virtue that is necessary for the expression of mature or complete virtue (Kristjánsson et al., 2021).

Neo-Aristotelians tend to see *phronesis* as playing a synthetic role among the other virtues, 'gluing' them together into concrete and virtuous action. Yet this synthesis cannot always be smooth. *Philia* offers a compelling case-study for the operation of *phronesis* because friendship presents certain prototypical conflicts between possible goods. *Philia* often involves deliberation between goods that pertain to one actor (in this case, the *phronimos*) and goods that pertain to another (the friend). This is not to say that there is no overlap in what is good for an agent and her friend. Of course, many of the things that are good for the agent will also be good for her friend. For example, both friends benefit from a properly administered community. Friends will often encounter areas of mutual interest, and thus situations where there is little conflict between the interests of the *phronimos* and the friend. However, sometimes situations arise in which a *phronimos* must adjudicate between what is good for the *phronimos* and what is good for her friend. Clean and abstract narratives of the efficiency of *phronesis* falter in this case, perhaps because even good people can feel powerfully conflicted in properly strenuous situations. For example, consider a virtue friendship between X and Y. Suppose that, due to misfortune, X falls into poverty, and requests help from Y. Y quite reasonably and *phronetically* responds to the ethical salience of his friend's plight. Y further recognizes that a life in poverty is less desirable (blueprinting). Y also feels compelled to help her friend (emotion regulation).

But, to render the example useful, let's suppose that Y has another pressing ethical concern demanding her resources. Perhaps Y's help can only be delivered by subjecting herself to poverty, or, alternatively, by depriving a third loved one of an important good.

We are then faced with two interpretations of the action of *phronesis*. On one account, which we can label the *efficient hypothesis*, any felt conflict between contrasting ethical concerns is relatively swiftly resolved through the action of the integrative function. In this case, the *phronimos* deliberates and decides on what is best, feeling it to be best, and is accordingly not conflicted, despite her inability to help her friend. A fair interpretation of the *efficient hypothesis* would allow for Y to feel sad, disappointed, or aggrieved for the inevitably regrettable outcome which must proceed from the situation, despite her actions. That is, Y must either help her friend, or neglect some other ethical concern, and in any case, someone will suffer. But Y will not feel conflicted about whichever virtuous path is pursued, because the integrative and emotional regulation component of *phronesis* functioned properly.

The efficient hypothesis, in short, supposes that *phronesis* is powerful enough to internally resolve such troubling ethical conflicts. We can propose, in contrast, an *intractability hypothesis*. On this account, the ethical concerns that arise between individuals do not admit of ready integration, if sufficiently charged and appropriately opposed. This is not to say that the *phronimos* does nothing when confronted with such conflicting concerns; presumably, the *phronimos* takes the most virtuous course of action, all things considered.

Yet, on the functional account of *phronesis* advocated earlier, the strong ethical concerns arising among multiple people raise quandaries for the integrative and emotion regulation functions of *phronesis*. On the one hand, how, if at all, does the *phronimos* integrate seemingly incommensurable concerns? And on the other hand, how does she feel once she takes what she judges to be the best course of action?

Answering these questions requires understanding the concrete particulars of the ethical situation. But this requirement suggests that the integrative function of *phronesis* may operate in importantly different ways across situations. Realistic accounts of integration in *phronetic philia* may mean that some ethical concerns in some instances of *philia* remain unresolved or are at least painful. Following the above example, the *phronimos* may choose not to provide material assistance to her friend, because she determines that it is best to use her resources to provide for her family. In this situation, we might expect the *phronimos* to still feel the desire to provide such assistance, even with the full recognition that she is unable to do so. The emotion regulation function, on this intuitive example, does not suffice to eliminate regret, among other emotions. Nor, perhaps, should it (cf. Nussbaum, 2001, particularly chapter 2).

The *phronimos*' decisions in ethically intractable situations are likely to be accompanied by feelings of loss, disappointment, or sadness. These emotions are appropriate to the situation, since the impulse to help a friend is thwarted by circumstances (even ethical restraints) beyond one's control. The efficiency hypothesis seems to suggest that one might resolve these feelings through a recognition of the circumstances beyond one's control. However, this rational recognition may not fully mitigate the desire to help one's friend. A *phronetic* person may therefore continue to yearn to help improve their friend's circumstances. Recognizing their friend's plight, they would not likely cease desiring their friend's welfare. As such, it is possible that a *phronetic* person would continue to feel a measure of sadness, if not conflict, while pursuing the virtuous path of providing for her own family while, at the same time, maintaining a desire to help her friend were it possible.

Situations presenting seemingly incommensurate ethical concerns between friends are more common than might appear, and they do more than just tug on our heartstrings. They reveal the ethical messiness at the heart of living, and they highlight both the scope and the limitations of *phronesis* in the real world. Because these situations arise so often in friendships, they reveal friendship as an excellent arena for the empirical and theoretical development of the *phronesis* construct. Furthermore, analysis of *phronesis* in the context of *philia* reveals two facts: I) that the *phronimos* is uniquely situated to navigate the difficulties that arise in character friendships, and II) that character friendships, even in the best cases and with the most virtuous actors, can still entail significant pain, disappointment, and difficulty.

Conflicts of Interest Statement: *The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest, or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.*

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Bio

Blaine Fowers, Ph.D. is Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Miami. He conducts theoretical and empirical investigations of virtue and flourishing. Fowers has written or co-written seven books, including *The Science of Virtue: A Framework for Research* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), *Phronesis: Retrieving practical wisdom in psychology, philosophy, and education* (Oxford University Press, 2024), *Suffering, and Vice: Flourishing in the Face of Human Limitations* (APA, 2017), *The Evolution of Ethics: Human Sociality and the Emergence of Ethical Mindedness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), *Virtue and Psychology* (APA, 2005), and *Re-Envisioning Psychology* (Jossey Bass, 1999). He and his research team study virtues, higher order goals, and their links to choiceworthy goods and human flourishing. Fowers has published over 100 peer reviewed articles and book chapters. He was a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Birmingham, England in 2016. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and a recipient of the Joseph B. Gittler Award for Contributions to the Philosophical Foundations of Psychology. Novak, Kiknadze, Sanabria, and Calder are advanced doctoral students who conduct research with Fowers at the University of Miami.

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