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INTRODUCTION

An introduction to the special issue on wisdom and moral education

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the present special issue on wisdom and moral education, which draws on a conference held in Oxford in 2017. Some of the seven contributions (by Sanderse; Ferkany; and Hatchimonji et al.) make use of the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom, while others focus more on the wisdom concept as it has developed in contemporary psychology (Huynh and Grossman; Ardelt; and Brocato, Hix and Jayawickreme). One (by Swartwood) straddles the distinction between the two. All the contributions, however, address in different ways practical questions about how wisdom can be evaluated and how it relates to issues of moral development and education.

KEYWORDS

Wisdom; phronesis; Aristotle; measurement; moral education

This special issue draws on a conference entitled ‘Character, Wisdom and Virtue’, organised by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues and held at Oriel College, Oxford, in January 2017. I thank the chief organiser, Professor James Arthur, for his support in putting this special issue together. As time went by, some of the original invitees to the special issue dropped out and others, who did not attend the conference, were invited, both in order to make up the missing numbers and also to provide a broader coverage of the current problematics regarding wisdom and moral education. I thank all the contributors for their patience in waiting for the issue to be published and for how well they responded to various suggestions by our reviewers. In my estimation, this issue provides a clear window to the current state of play in the discursive field—both insofar as we can consider it a united field and as a series of overlapping sub-fields.

Wisdom is an amorphous and contested concept and it is a tall order to propose to give an overview of it, either as a discrete standalone topic of study, or how it relates to questions of moral development and education. Under the general umbrella of ‘wisdom’ there lurk a number of sub-concepts. Two of those can, arguably, be defined with reasonable specificity. One is wisdom as sophia: excellence in contemplating the topics of some of the most abstract subjects of study, such as mathematics and physics (and possibly theology). Sophia represents wisdom at its most theoretical and least earthbound level. Diametrically opposed to sophia is ultra-practical instrumentalist thinking: what the ancient Greeks called deinotes (cleverness or calculation). If we want to plant a tree or make money in the stock market, deinotes advises us on the most propitious steps to
achieve our aim. The problem is that there is not great interest in those two sub-concepts, either in contemporary philosophy, psychology, or education or among the general public (that is, when ordinary language users talk about wisdom or wise people). Ascriptions of wisdom, or lack thereof, are typically made in the context of evaluating persons in terms of their moral excellence, either as wise choosers in specific circumstances or as people possessing some more general knowledge of—and command in dealing with—life’s boundless psycho-moral, social and existential vicissitudes.

Aristotle registered his disillusionment with deinotes and argued that virtuous people use a more specific intellectual capacity to steer them through the hard choices that we encounter in wanting to be good, especially when different virtuous motivations seem to come into conflict with one another and create virtue dilemmas. He called this capacity, or intellectual virtue, phronesis. It is under discussion in three of the contributions to this issue and I say something more about those presently. However, phronesis is quite a narrowly circumscribed capacity and perhaps not sufficient to account for what ordinary people refer to when they talk about someone—say, an old sage—as possessing bountiful world wisdom. Since psychologists are typically more interested in lay constructs—what those mean and how they are correlated with psycho-social outcomes—than technical concepts that play a role only within specific academic language games, they have tended to cast their net wider in search of wisdom than simply focusing on the contours of phronesis (not to mention sophia). I discuss the more capacious concept of wisdom, which is addressed in three of the contributions and critiqued in the fourth, later in this Introduction.

**Phronesis or practical wisdom/intelligence**

Phronesis is a key concept in Aristotelian and Aristotle-inspired theories of virtue ethics and character education. In short, phronesis refers to the capacity of knowing and enacting the right course of (moral) action through a process of identifying and deliberating between competing values, emotions and alternatives. It is:

- A virtue of autonomous, critical thinking;
- Deals with human action;
- Consists of both instrumental cleverness and natural virtues;
- Involves excellence in practical deliberation.

To be more accurate, Aristotle defines phronesis as an intellectual meta-virtue which guides the moral virtues. Feeding on character traits cultivated in the young through habituation, phronesis—after it comes into play—re-evaluates those traits critically, allowing them to share in reason. One of its core functions is to assess the relative weight of competing values, courses of action and emotions with respect to human flourishing (eudaimonia): the ultimate good and unconditional end of human beings. It adjudicates the relative weight of different virtues in conflict situations and enables us to make wise choices about what to feel and do. The idea here is this. We all possess different sets of virtues: moral, civic, intellectual and performative. However, the demands of those often appear to come into conflict with one another, between sets or within sets. For example, it is difficult enough to learn to be honest. It is even more difficult, however, to know what
to do when honesty clashes with considerateness. Then we desperately need phronesis for arbitration (Kristjánsson, 2015a, Chapter 4).

In the last 30 years, phronesis has not only been studied with more rigour in philosophy than ever before, it has also become something of a buzzword within pockets of social science, in both socio-political theory and psychology. It has also acquired a status within formidable recent approaches of the virtue ethical kind to professional ethics, especially in the so-called ‘people professions’, such as nursing, law, business/management, social work, teaching and medicine (Darnell, Gulliford, Kristjánsson, & Paris, 2019). However, many of those approaches do not follow the Aristotelian script on phronesis, so we have accounts that specify phronesis along either (a) Aristotelian or MacIntyrean lines (MacIntyre, 1981); as (b) universalist or relativist; as (c) generalist or particularist; and as (d) alleviating the pain of hard choices or leaving residues of pain (Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 11, 2015b). Even for those who want to remain at least minimally deferential to Aristotle, there is no consensus about how to interpret this complex virtue, which does not identify only means to ends but also informs the ends themselves to a certain extent, as we revisit and revise them on our developmental journeys (Irwin, 1975). No explicit psychological instrument to measure phronesis exists presently (although one is in the making, based on a four-component model of Aristotelian phronesis, see Darnell et al., 2019), which is somewhat astounding, given the recent interest in the construct in various research areas. One of the reasons is that psychologists tend be interested in a more capacious wisdom concept, as already noted, although a recent instrument designed among others by one of the authors in this special issue, Igor Grossman, seems to be moving closer to the Aristotelian construct in terms of context-specificity (Brienza, Kung, Santos, Bobocel, & Grossman, 2018).

Burnyeat’s (1980) classic paper draws a fairly clear distinction between early-years Aristotelian habituation and later-developing phronesis. This has puzzled many authors, who see a paradox in how a critical faculty can be developed uncritically (see Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 3), and they have wanted to take a different tack, by incorporating phronesis education, at gradually more sophisticated levels, in the habituation education itself from the very beginning. In his contribution to this special issue, Wouter Sanderse grabs so to speak the other end of the stick by arguing that habituation continues to play a role in moral development even after phronesis has fully kicked in. Habituation is not just a ladder to be thrown away after people have become practically wise. Sanderse is not only speaking here about those who stagnate in their moral development and never achieve any serious measure of phronesis. Even for those who become reasonably competent at phronesis, and can even be termed full phronimoi, there is still a place for habituation, for example in adapting to new laws passed by the legislature and for those pursuing a career in a professional practice such as medicine where new skill-sets constantly need to be adapted to as part of a life-long education. In general, Sanderse problematises any simplistic dichotomy between habituation and phronesis development.

In his contribution, Matt Ferkany provides an even more far-ranging critique of some of the common assumptions about and interpretations of phronesis, which he prefers to call ‘practical intelligence’. Ferkany’s argumentative targets are so many that they are difficult to summarise without simply paraphrasing the whole of his long and rich study. The main lesson I derive from it is that there is reason to be sceptical of any Kolhbergian-
style stage-developmental accounts of phronesis development, because phronesis fulfils so many functions in the good life that one is unlikely to see all its ‘developmental antecedents’ progress in tandem in any one individual. Ferkany is critical of Aristotle’s idealism which sees full phronesis as necessary and sufficient for a life of full virtue. In general, he considers Aristotle’s infamous unity-of-virtue thesis incompatible with the fact of human imperfection. On Ferkany’s account, my avoidance of keeping any tubs of ice cream in my freezer, for fear that I might eat them all at once when I am feeling peckish and frustrated, could be seen as a display of the workings of phronesis in my psyche, although on the literal and strict Aristotelian account, being self-controlled in this way is just a poor substitute for being phronetic. While reminding us throughout of the usefulness of the phronesis-concept, Ferkany asks us to be ready to revise it to bring it into line with psychological realism about the workings of imperfect human beings.

Aristotle is notoriously reticent and cryptic about how phronesis actually develops, apart from some general remarks about how it can be educated through teaching, experience and critical engagement with so-called character friends. Authors who propose phronesis interventions for schools or universities therefore need to be fairly rhapsodic, with respect to Aristotle, and academically creative. In their contribution, Hatchimonji, Linsky, Nayman and Elias describe their design of a Spiral Model of phronesis development for use as part of social-emotional and character education in low-resourced US urban schools with students aged 11–14. They are particularly drawn to the potential integrative function of phronesis in pulling together the different priorities of positive youth development initiatives under one umbrella. The resulting framework has been used to develop a curriculum called ‘Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character’ (MOSAIC). The spiral staircase model helps visualise the ingredients of phronesis and also identify the barriers and enablers that hinder or help students in progressing towards phronesis as an aspirational goal. While drawing on standard neo-Aristotelian componential accounts of good character, as developed for example by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, this new model places more emphasis on the motivating role of positive purpose, driving the climb up the staircase, than Aristotle himself would have done, precisely because Aristotle’s educational account was geared towards students already brought up in good habits—something one cannot count on in the average middle school. Although most phronesis interventions tend to be aimed at slightly older students, this article adds backbone to the views of those who refuse to see phronesis development confined to late adolescence and early adulthood.

Phronesis appears, to many readers of Aristotle, as a somewhat mysterious concept. It is often described via the metaphor of the conductor who integrates the various instrument groups in a large orchestra (here made up of virtues and character strengths). However, what the precise characteristics of this conductor are, and how those are best acquired, causes continued bafflement. Moreover, even if this conductor is apt at making wise choices, harmonising the overall sound effects of the character orchestra, does it mean that she is thereby an overall wise person?

**The wisdom concept in current psychology**

Contemporary psychologists generally seem to agree that there is more to wisdom than just making wise choices in the sort of situations that Aristotle had in mind. Indeed,
some of them, sympathetic to an instrumentalist model of means-end reasoning, might think that nothing more than deinotes is required to fulfil this function and that phronesis is a redundant concept (cf. Fowers’s, 2010 critique of the reigning instrumentalism in current psychology; he could have included economics in the mix). At all events, psychologists tend to be interested in a more capacious concept than phronesis, representing wisdom, although they do not agree on the contours or the role of the concept. In Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) much-used VIA-model, wisdom is just one of the six core virtues, without being accorded a status either as an integrative meta-virtue (like phronesis) or a master virtue (trumping other virtues, like justice in Plato’s system).

The standard models of wisdom in psychology, however, go further than this and give wisdom some sort of an overarching role, either explicitly or implicitly. They do so on the grounds of having elicited the views of either ‘the wise’ (the experts on wisdom) or ‘the many’ (the general public), or both. After this empirical groundwork, psychologists have come up with specifications of wisdom that give rise to measurements of wisdom through qualitative instruments (interviews, as in the well-known Berlin Model) or quantitative ones (self-report surveys as in Monika Ardelt’s model). The Berlin Model defines wisdom as an individual’s overall expert system—a motivational meta-heuristic—on the fundamental pragmatics of life, relating to the individual’s conduct and construction of meaning as she orchestrates her development towards excellence. The expertise in question is then measured with five criteria: the richness of relevant factual knowledge; the richness of relevant procedural knowledge; the extent of life-span contextualism and perspective; sufficient relativism of values and life priorities to produce toleration of difference; and the recognition and management of uncertainty (Staudinger & Glück, 2011, pp. 222–223). An expert is expected to score higher on these criteria than a novice, and thus be overall more wise. To gauge this methodologically, respondents are presented with dilemmas involving difficult life choices and are asked to reflect out loud. Those reflections are then transcribed and evaluated by a select panel of judges in light of the five wisdom criteria (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 126).

Ardelt (2004) worries that, like Kohlberg’s famous dilemmas, current wisdom measures home in on mere intellectual knowledge and verbal dexterity. As an alternative, she has developed a Likert-scale self-report questionnaire whereby people are asked to agree or disagree with certain statements about themselves. The statements fall into three main categories: cognitive (measuring deep understanding of human life), reflective (measuring insightful perception of events from multiple perspectives) and affective (measuring sympathetic and compassionate love for others). Ardelt considers those categories to make up a ‘relatively parsimonious’ and operationalisable model of wisdom (2004, p. 274). In more recent work, Igor Grossman, with various colleagues, has developed a model that is meant to be more sensitive than either the Berlin Model or the Ardelt one to how variable wisdom seems to be across situations (Grossman, 2017). Hence, the previously mentioned instrument (Brienza et al., 2018) that is meant to situate wisdom and wisdom exemplars within particular socio-moral contexts: an instrument that, in a sense, closes the circle of wisdom research by bringing it back into a territory already occupied by phronesis. Yet the concept of wisdom at work here is, arguably, still more capacious than at least Aristotle’s original concept of phronesis by not limiting considerations of wisdom to strictly ‘ethical’ contexts.
In her contribution to this special issue, Ardelt (who considers wisdom a master virtue) explores whether university courses that try to engage the whole person and involve a service-learning component foster wisdom and psychological growth above and beyond ordinary religion or sociology classes. The details of the study can be found in Ardelt’s paper, but it suffices to say here that the experimental group increased significantly in wisdom whereas the control group’s wisdom actually decreased. Even more relevant for readers of this journal than this single experiment are, however, Ardelt’s sensible observations about wisdom interventions in general: how wisdom can only be nurtured indirectly by providing favourable conditions for its development. There is no magic bullet available to bolster wisdom itself. Interestingly, Ardelt thinks of foolishness as the opposite of wisdom, whereas for Aristotle the person lacking *phronesis* could still be pretty ‘bright’ in various wisdom-relevant ways.

In their contribution, Brocato, Hix and Jayawickreme explore some of the complexities of measuring wisdom and wisdom-related constructs. More specifically, they home in on the mismatch between experimenters’ intended interpretations of items in the relevant questionnaires and young respondents’ unintended interpretations of those items (as gauged through a secondary analysis of cognitive interviews). The problems identified here go beyond the standard limitations of questionnaires but have to do with the specific construct being targeted, namely wisdom. Most of the relevant research indicates that wisdom increases with age. However, the findings reported on in this paper indicate that it is not a single uniform variable that gets higher scores with age. Rather, people at a different age or developmental level may interpret the variable quite differently. Thus, simply playing the guitar might count as a ‘self-transcendent activity’ for a young person and contribute to that person’s meaning-in-life score, whereas it would not even register as one for an older person. As the researchers’ interpretations are likely to be more in line with those of the older respondents, this may skew their understanding of their findings.

In their contribution, Huynh and Grossman offer a helpful overview of the potential implications of their way of understanding wisdom in a more context-sensitive way than in previous psychological models both on interventions to enhance wisdom and how wisdom progress can be evaluated. They argue that any wisdom-focused education should be sensitive to ‘the individual, educational, material-specific, situational, and cultural contexts’. They also suggest that self-distancing can be a useful tool to boost wisdom: namely, adopting an ego-decentred viewpoint when reflecting upon a situation. As any teacher who tried to cultivate wisdom in students would automatically have to do this, in talking through examples of people and situations beyond her own experiences, Huynh and Grossman’s somewhat surprising conclusion is that the greatest effect of wisdom education might potentially be on the teacher herself rather than on her students.

The longest essay in this special issue is by Jason Swartwood who focuses his critical lens both on the recent psychological constructs and measurements of wisdom and on the *phronesis* tradition in philosophy. Swartwood is fairly sceptical of all three psychological approaches to wisdom mentioned above. He thinks that, while all of those are meant to be ‘practical’, none of them satisfies the three minimal conditions that any account of practical wisdom needs to satisfy (in order to make coherent the connection between wisdom and performance in actual life decisions): namely, explaining how practical wisdom is a grasp (1) of what one ought to do; (2) all-things-considered; (3) in particular situations. However, for those who might think that Swartwood is simply—
in a cheeky display of philosophical arrogance—recommending a return from the current psychological approaches to a time-honoured philosophical understanding of wisdom as \textit{phronesis}, there is a sting in the tail. Swartwood does not believe that \textit{any} simple and comprehensive account of those success conditions, amenable to measurement, is possible. This is because practical wisdom is essentially uncodifiable: ‘we cannot boil down the decisions that comprise a well-lived life to a set of rules that an unwise person could use to decide what they ought to do in all the situations they might face’. Obviously this does not mean that an individual cannot be taught to navigate better the issues that she is facing, given her unique situation and unique characterological make-up and personal history. It simply means that there is no way to measure either \textit{phronesis} or any account that psychologists can come up with objectively in a way that can be generalised across groups of different individuals.

To some readers, who understand Aristotle’s \textit{phronesis} as an uncodifiable concept (see various views critiqued in Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 11), Swartwood’s pessimism simply reiterates Aristotle’s own point. Others, who do not subscribe to the uncodifiability assumption, will see this as a very unfortunate departure from the aspirations of the scientist Aristotle who loved to measure things and make the un-measured measurable. In any case, as often happens in the history of human thought, we seem to have come the full circle. Until we have a clear grasp of \textit{phronesis} as practical wisdom, it is impossible to judge if and how that capacity can be taught and measured—and also at the same time to judge whether there is need for a broader concept of wisdom, more in line with everyday conceptions, that is perhaps more amenable to teaching and measurement. I hope the essays in this special issue aid us in continuing to think through those questions.

\section*{Disclosure statement}

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

\section*{Notes on contributor}

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