

# Phronesis, Ethics and Realism

Written by Richard Shapcott

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RICHARD SHAPCOTT, FEB 7 2013

David McCourt's recent contribution to *e-International Relations* on the idea of phronesis in IR is a useful contribution to how we think about the relationship between theory and practice, or praxis. He is correct in identifying a growing interest in, and chorus of approval for, bringing this idea back into the study of IR and political science more generally. However his portrayal of the idea of phronesis is perhaps a bit one sided and lends itself to an incomplete understanding of the term, as he also acknowledges. As McCourt portrays it, phronesis is largely about practical matters of statecraft and he associates it with the notion of prudence. Prudence is a term used often by realists to describe a realist statecraft, and it is the virtue required of a state person navigating their ship of state. McCourt's account has some similarity with this understanding of phronesis as prudence, while acknowledging a larger scope of ethical concern than that permitted by classical realism.

However there are other aspects of phronesis that need to be expanded on if we are to understand the full potentials of the concept and to be able to use it and encourage its development in policy and other areas. The first thing to note is that phronesis is a form not just of practical reasoning, but also of ethical reasoning, it is of course in Aristotle's *Nicomachean ethics* that it is elaborated. Thus phronesis is not merely the virtue of making the right technical decision to get the right end in the circumstance, it is about reflecting on both the means and ends at stake in any decision and action. It is first and foremost a mode of ethical reasoning. As a mode of ethical reasoning it is distinct from, say, Kantian universalism or much contemporary liberalism because these deal in transcendent values. For Kant we must act in accordance with universal reason and what is the right thing to be done must be derived from principles that are universalisable and removed from the everyday. Of course Kant also acknowledge that interpretation and application were necessary, but for him the universal could not be changed.

In contrast according to Gadamer, Aristotle's discussion of *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* illustrates the manner in which general or universal principles or commonly held values are mediated and applied in particular circumstances. In *phronesis* "...the meaning of any universal, or any norm, is only justified and determined in and through its concretization." [i] In this sense practical wisdom is knowledge of what to do or how to act in a particular situation and involves understanding what is at stake in that situation 'of what it is right to do here and now.' Gadamer argues that for those employing practical reasoning the question of justice "...is totally relative to the ethical situation in which we find ourselves. We cannot say in a general and abstract way which actions are just and which are not: there are no just actions 'in themselves', independent of what the situation requires." [ii]

The value and meaning of phronesis as a mode of reasoning can be best understood, by contrasting it with the technical instrumental rationality, *techne*. *Techne* involves a simple relation between means and ends: ends are set in advance and reason is used in determining how to apply established means to achieve them. In the social realm this corresponds to the idea that 'the good' can be determined in advance and in abstraction outside of the particular circumstance. However in *phronesis* both means and ends are subjects of deliberation and reflection: "...what separates it fundamentally from technical expertise is that it expressly asks the question of the good too." [iii]

In contrast to *techne* the actor informed by *phronesis* does not 'know' how to act in a certain situation, instead they use their experience, knowledge and judgement to come to *understand* a situation, to perceive what is at stake or at issue and to make a decision as to how to act or what is right to do. The actor does not 'know' how to act in advance but instead *gains* understanding of a situation. It is in this sense that practical reasoning involves "a question of

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perceiving what is at stake in a given situation.”[iv] Where *techné* suggests that application is simply a moment of applying universal to particular *phronesis* suggests that application determines the meaning of both universal and particular.

At first glance this sort of formulation points towards ‘communitarian’ and pluralist ethics, as it suggests a form of anti-universalism, an anti-cosmopolitanism. However to read it that way would be to miss half of the question, *phronesis* is not anti-universalist; it is dialogical or dialectical in that the meaning of both universal and particular ethics can only be determined in situ. What it might mean for instance, is that while we can’t assume that liberal individualism is an uncontested universal desire, or that liberalism represents the good life, and we cannot simply apply our understanding of liberalism to others and expect them to confirm with it, we can ask ourselves whether freedom and equality might be pursued differently in different cultures, that there are limits on how these might be advanced, and that a wise policy recognises this. Doing so might cause us to reflect upon the meaning of individualism, freedom, justice and equality and how these values can be realised and what they might mean for people in different situations.

*Phronesis* might also mean that in our relations with others we might understand that we may have to choose between two evils, or that we might have to put other considerations secondary to ‘moral’ agendas. In so doing *phronesis* involves not abandoning question of good or right but situating them in a concrete situation where doing what is right may involve compromise. Clearly this sounds like prudence as realists practice it, and it shares much with it. However in terms of substance there is nothing in the Aristotelian account that substantively coheres with the substance of the realist account of prudence. In other words *phronesis* suggests that the national interest is not to be taken for granted as ethical start and end point of ethical reflection. Instead considerations of the national interest needs to be reflected in the context of what’s good not only for the state, or the society of states but for the world as whole, that is for humanity.

Thus *phronesis* is not just prudence in the sense of a reasoned recognition of the limits of what can be done, but also an ethical virtue that involves reflection on means and ends. Are the ends justifiable, for instance, and are they justifiable to everyone?

*Phronesis* as a virtue requires the exercise of judgement drawing upon knowledge and understanding of a situation that exceeds what may simply be taught. Thus *phronesis* is also unlike *techné* in that it is not a knowledge that is readily transmittable or transferable. *Phronesis* requires wisdom and insight, which can only be gained by experience. Experience, for the German philosopher Gadamer, brings knowledge of the limits of human capacities and powers. Experience teaches us that we are not ultimately in control of our destiny: “[I]n experience man’s powers to do and his planning reason come up against their limits.”[v]

*Phronesis* nonetheless is clearly distinguished from the realist account of prudence, which emphasises the tragic nature of human experience and turns this into a dogmatic account of the limits of politics. Gadamer argues that experience associated with *phronesis* does not equate with cynicism or even tragedy but rather openness to future experience. The experience of finitude results in an openness to new possibilities:

Experience, in the true sense of its meaning, teaches one inwardly to know that he is not lord over time. It is the experienced man who knows the limits of all anticipation, the insecurity of all human plans. *Yet this does not render him rigid and dogmatic but rather open for new experience.*[vi]

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[i]Gadamer. *Reason in The Age of Science*, p. 82.

[ii]H.G. Gadamer, 'The Problem of Historical Consciousness', in P. Rabinow, & W.M. Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (University of California Press, 1979), p. 140.

[iii]Gadamer *Reason in The Age of Science*, p. 93.

[iv]Hoy, *The Critical Circle*, p. 58.

R. Palmer, *Hermeneutics; Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969., p. 197.

[vi]Palmer .1969, p. 195.