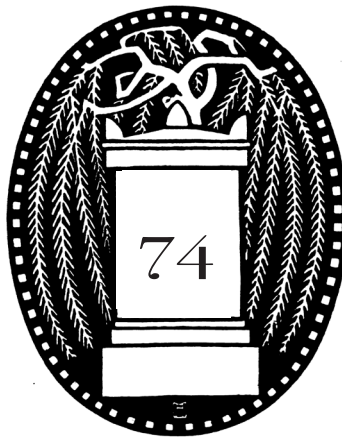


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Teaching as Eudaimonism: Aristotle's Moral Virtues, Intellectual Virtues, and the Phronetic Bond

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Introduction

Aristotle (335 B.C.E./1941) contends moral virtue establishes the good or bad ends humans seek. In addition to naming, defining, and explaining nine moral virtues, Aristotle (335 B.C.E./1941) identifies and defines five intellectual virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), Book VI. Because Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) connects the moral with the intellectual through *phronesis*, a connection ideally suited to educating the young, I focus on the intellectual virtue he names, *phronesis*, and defines as “a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good and bad” (1140b5). For Aristotle, the person who desires “proper” or moral ends and enacts those ends through the intellectual virtue, *phronesis*, attains happiness or human flourishing: *eudaimonia* (Roche, 2014). Shouldn't society aim to form moral human beings who flourish individually and in community? Surprisingly, school administrators, curriculum directors, and teachers, consciously or not, often ignore, never consider, or have forgotten that educators form their students into a particular kind of human being. Although such concerns as following state mandates and ensuring students meet performance standards often eclipse teachers' forming students into moral, thriving human beings, when teachers reason well regarding good or bad ends and desire those good ends when teaching, teachers and their students achieve the *eudaimonia* (happiness, human flourishing, the good life) about which Aristotle (335 B.C.E./1941) writes.

I claim Aristotle's (335 B.C.E./1941) concept, *phronesis* (practical wisdom), and more broadly *eudaimonism*, addresses the teacher's knowing *how* while recovering teaching's virtue-oriented, humanistic purpose to form students into moral human beings who use their intelligence and learning to better themselves and society toward human flourishing. I therefore advocate that educators should consider embracing, promoting, and practicing the means to *eudaimonism*, thereby reviving the teaching profession and returning it to a meaningful, humanistic endeavor. To ground my claim and advocacy, I begin by defining and explaining Aristotle's

concept, *endaimonia*. Next, I turn to Aristotle's moral virtues, habit, and the mean before touching upon his five intellectual virtues, focusing specifically on *phronesis*, distinguishing phronetic knowledge from the other intellectual virtues. I explain the relation Aristotle draws between *phronesis* and the moral virtues and between *phronesis* and the other four intellectual virtues. Having provided Aristotle's "virtue ethics" as foundation, I argue for the current need to infuse teaching with moral purposes. I then position *endaimonia* within contemporary teaching practice and consider in-service and pre-service teachers' growing, developing, and practicing *phronesis*. I conclude by considering how teachers' practicing Aristotle's concept of *endaimonism* humanizes, ennobles, and gives moral purpose to the teaching profession.

Aristotle's Eudaimonia

In *NE*, Book I (335 B.C.E./1941), Aristotle names, defines, and explains *endaimonia*, a concept one translates to mean human flourishing or happiness, a "good": "Every act and every inquiry, and similarly every action and purpose, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" (1094a1–5). Known as the "function argument," to reach the good, the human person must fulfill his/her function (*ergon*) (Michaelides, 2020; Salem, 2010). Aristotle (335 B.C.E./1941) posits a person's performing his/her function requires the full capacity of his/her reasoning which includes not only reflection but deliberation and selection (Michaelides, 2020). Cultivating virtuous activity leads one toward *endaimonia* (Hirji, 2018; Michaelides, 2020), for one only realizes *endaimonia* by acting virtuously (1098a15–19; 1177b5–9). Indeed, *endaimonia* "is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue" (1102a5), a "state of being well and doing well in being well" (MacIntyre, 1982, p. 148).

Aristotle's Moral Virtues, Habit, and the Mean

In *NE*, Book II (335 B.C.E./1941), Aristotle identifies two kinds of virtue: moral virtue and intellectual virtue. Moral virtues pertain to emotion and desire, shaping one's appetitive desires, wants, and character through reason, leading to agents' seeking right courses of action and emotive responses (Polansky, 2014). The mean between two extremes, moral virtues include courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity or great souledness, proper ambition or proper pride, patience or good temper, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation. One develops moral virtue through habit (1103a15–17), for "we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (1103b). While one habituates oneself to the moral virtues, one should not think of habit as mindless routine. Although one translates the word Aristotle uses for moral virtue, *hexis*, into Latin as *habitus*, which in English translates to "habit," Aristotle uses *hexis* to represent the soul's active, ready condition to act deliberately and for its own sake (Sachs, n.d.). The so-called habit of moral virtue is actually the cognitive understanding

and attentiveness to know *when* and *how* to achieve the virtues. In other words, enacting the virtues depends upon each individual's disposition. One must possess knowledge, be able to choose a given act for its own sake, and have a solid and strong character from which the act proceeds (1105a30).

Aristotle (335 B.C.E./1941) defines virtue as a “state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean [the golden mean], i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (1107a).¹ One's situation tempers one's anger, for example. Although a pre-determined level of anger does not exist because one situation may demand more anger than another, if rationality does not temper one's anger, that anger can only occur as excess or deficit. Using art as an analogy for how the mean reflects beauty, Aristotle claims when one observes a great work, nothing excessive or defective exists. Similarly, virtue does not live in excess or defect but in an intermediate or balanced state, the golden mean (1106b10–15). Aristotle offers several examples of virtues emanating from the mean. Courage is the mean between the excess of confidence and the defect of fear; temperance is the mean between the excess of self-indulgence and defect of insensibility; and proper pride is the mean between the excess of empty vanity and defect of undue humility (1107b5–25). The man of practical wisdom judges which action is most appropriate for a specific situation (Russell, 2014). Aristotle maintains the agent's reaching the virtues in this way will “feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way” (1106b20). While hitting the mark, choosing the good, and selecting wholeness (vs. defect) is limited and difficult (1106b30), ways to miss the mark, choose excess, or select defect are limitless. Difficulty hitting the mark reflects the importance of virtue's being a disposition or character-based quality one achieves over time through reflection and practice; that is, by applying the rational principle (*orthos logos*).

While realizing Aristotle's moral virtues for oneself seems a daunting task, since the human person must develop proper habits and possess the capacity to deliberate over each situation, one could argue that acting virtuously offers clarity and freedom in both choosing the proper virtue and deliberating on how to attain it.

Once the earliest habits are neutralized, our desires are disentangled from the pressure for immediate gratification, we are calm enough to think, and most important, we can see what is in front of us in all its possibility. The mean state here is not a point on a dial that we need to fiddle up and down; it is a clearing in the midst of pleasures and pains that lets us judge what seems most truly pleasant and painful. (Sachs, n.d., n.p.)

Aristotle indeed stipulates the virtuous person must deliberate and reason effectively (Kraut, 2022), think and deliberate over the right course

of action for a given virtuous end. The person sees a “clearing” in the specific situation based on what he/she knows and has experienced as opposed anxiously to wonder what the right course of action should be or acquiescing to a preconceived, static, moral standard.

Aristotle’s Intellectual Virtues, Phronesis, and the Phronetic Bond

Although Aristotle does not comprehensively explain the intellectual virtues until Book VI, he identifies five intellectual virtues: *phronesis* (practical wisdom or prudence), *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *techné* (art, artistry, craftsmanship), *nous* (intuitive reason or understanding), and *sophia* (philosophic wisdom). Intellectual virtues are those of the rational soul (Solopova, 2016) and therefore require one’s reasoning and thinking skills rather than one’s emotions and desires. Associated with action, *phronesis* (practical wisdom, prudence) concerns human affairs and variable, uncertain, particular knowledge (1139b15–19; Eisner, 2002; Stenberg & Maaranen, 2020). The practical or phronetic person may have more experience than intellectual knowledge vs. having more intellectual knowledge than experience. A person may know intellectually *about* leaner and healthier meats, but without having experience consuming them, that person may also not have experienced the positive health results emerging from eating lean over fatty meats. The person having consumed lean meats over time would likely experience positive health from having eaten lean meats rather than fatty ones (1141b15–20). As the lean meat example demonstrates, *phronesis* concerns particulars and one’s deliberating over these particulars. Significantly, Aristotle conceptualizes *phronesis* as the process by which human persons attain moral virtue, for while moral virtue informs humans about the right end, *phronesis* or “practical wisdom makes...[one] take the right means” (1144a5–10) to that end.

In contrast to *phronesis*, *episteme* (scientific knowledge) involves demonstrating first principles or such invariables (1140b) as a mathematical equation or the Pythagorean theorem (Vontz & Goodson, 2020) “to know why.” Unlike *phronesis* whose action, good action, is an end in and of itself (1140b5–10), the intellectual virtue, *techné*, delineates “know how” that, when applied, results in producing an object or accomplishing an end. Although like *episteme* with *teché* one must know principles or methods, *teché*’s aim is not disinterested understanding but making or doing toward producing a human-created product Aristotle asserts will necessarily imperfectly represent nature. The intellectual virtue, *nous* (intuitive reason or understanding), builds upon *episteme*’s reliance on first principles. Together *nous* and *episteme* become *sophia* (philosophical wisdom), things greatest and most noble by nature. While *phronesis* concerns human affairs (1141b) and what is good for human beings (1143b20–25), *sophia* is the complete form of knowledge (1141a15), therefore superior to *phronesis*, and involves the highest objects, things higher than human beings (1141a). While developing the virtue of *sophia* means seeking the good, those working to develop the

virtue of *phronesis* observe “well the various matters concerning” (1141a25) the different ways human beings act.

Although Aristotle defines *sophia* (philosophical knowledge) as superior to *phronesis*, he defines it as a higher kind of knowledge because it rises above the particular. When looking at *phronesis*’ function, one discerns one cannot achieve the happiness, human thriving, and good life that is *eudaimonia* without *phronesis*. Russell (2014) highlights the relation between *phronesis* and moral virtue: “It is because of one’s virtue that one has the right end, Aristotle says, and it is because of one’s... [*phronesis*] that one does the right thing toward that end” (p. 205). Both moral virtue and *phronesis* are necessary for happiness or human flourishing. As indicated earlier, attaining moral virtue means one must apply the “right rule” (rational inquiry), and the “right rule” accords with the phronetic “right means” for “right action.” Although some may conceive the virtues as divided from each other, allowing an individual to master one but not the others, Aristotle insists the phronetic individual realizes all the virtues, moral and intellectual. Indeed, to possess any of the virtues is to have all of them (Kristjánsson, Fowers, Darnell, & Pollard, 2021; Russell, 2014), “for with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues” (1145a1–2). Moral virtues align with *phronesis* (1144b21–28) that in turn bonds with both the moral virtues and the other four intellectual virtues, manipulating “the action according to right reason” (Hadjipanteli, 2018, p. 452). The individual achieves the good life—happiness or human flourishing—through this bonding (Hadjipanteli, 2018; Kristjánsson et al., 2021).

Phronesis and the Teaching Profession

Juxtaposing this scholarship on Aristotle’s virtue ethics and *phronesis* is scholarship expounding the roles, responsibilities, and tasks both PK–12 and higher education teachers must fulfill. To put this literature into perspective, I turn to Susan Moore Johnson (2004), author of *Finders and Keepers: Helping New Teachers Survive and Thrive in Our Schools*.

Good teaching is demanding and exhausting work even in the best of workplaces. A teacher is virtually always “on,” hour after hour, day after day, week after week. A typical school day reliably brings constant, though often unpredictable, demands from students, administrators, and parents. Even the most experienced teacher simply cannot rely on acquired expertise or dare to teach on automatic pilot, because each group of students presents unique instructional dilemmas and opportunities. (p. 10)

Those constant and unpredictable demands Johnson (2004) mentions include the educational setting, teachers’ feedback to students, and students’ behaviors and responses to teacher and lesson content (Ulferts, 2021). Teachers must reflect and decide upon instruction, including planning, implementing lessons, and assessing and evaluating students

(Burden & Byrd, 2019). Closely connected to instructional decision-making is considering students' learning styles and strategizing for teaching the content to target the various intelligences all people have (Loughran, 2010). Teachers must also keep up with and use emerging instructional technologies, fill the demands of increasingly diverse populations, and find ways to help students meet their various learning challenges (Kowalczyk-Waledziak, Korzeniecka-Bondar, Danilewicz, & Lauwers, 2019; Medford & Lee-Piggott, 2022;).

In addition to the roles, responsibilities, and tasks teachers perform relative to students and influenced by what van Manen (1994) calls a "modernist faith" in technology's rationalistic approach to knowledge, teachers must bow to a managerial class's dictating educational objectives through state mandates and accountability initiatives (Boyles, 2020). Being pressed into obedience has resulted in many teachers' "technicist views of teaching where expertise and decision-making are reduced to instrumental and technical forms of rationality which can be packaged and transmitted to practitioners in a hierarchical manner" (Florian & Graham, 2014, p. 6). As a result, the practice of teaching depends on scientific rationality and data-driven decision-making (Pickup, 2020). Thus, the managerial class rarely measures teachers' worth according to their attaining and mastering content knowledge, concepts, and skills and psychological knowledge and skills to read students' needs and behaviors and then act appropriately to help meet those needs and help students master their own behaviors. Instead, the managerial class measures teachers' worth against students' test scores, accreditation standards and outcomes, student retention, pass and graduation rates, and students' acceptance into higher-education institutions.

Eudaimonia and Teaching

To see the connection between the teaching profession and *eudaimonism*, one must understand teaching as a moral endeavor, specifically, understand how the teacher's virtuous means and ends when working with students aligns with Aristotle's virtue ethics. Higgins (2003) argues "ethical import" ladens the education profession because "school events," instructional and relationship decisions, identifying and delivering necessary instructional improvements, and assessment and evaluation processes are value-based activities. Fenstermacher, Osguthorpe, and Sanger (2009) build upon Higgins' (2003) contention that ethical import ladens the profession by moving from ethics to morals, distinguishing between "teaching morality" and "teaching morally" lest someone overrule teaching's ethical import by associating teaching morally with religion. Higgins (2003) specifically defines teaching morally to mean teaching "in a manner that accords with notions of what is good or right" (p. 8). Echoing Higgins (2003) and Fenstermacher et al. (2009), Sanderse and Cooke (2021) claim teachers should aim toward the good, teaching to reflect right actions, thereby helping their students in the present and future as they grow into living their adult lives. A prerequisite

for *eudaimonia*, teachers must indeed recognize their own moral intentions upfront because these intentions establish the relation between the ends for which teachers aim and the deliberation needed to arrive at those ends. Linking directly to Aristotle's *eudaimonism* by claiming "education, in a broad sense, is the enactment of visions of human flourishing" (Higgins, 2003, p. 136), Higgins asserts teachers perform their teaching functions by finding ways to arrive at good ends for students, thereby revealing the educational aim to promote and foster their own and their students' realizing the good life, *eudaimonia*. Aristotle explains the truly happy person leads a virtuous life; all one's actions aim toward *eudaimonism* (1094a1–5).

Growing, Developing, and Practicing Phronesis in Teaching

Moral teachers deliberate upon, select right action, and act to achieve virtuous ends through *phronesis* (Furman, 2016). Drawing from Furman's (2016) work, Stenberg and Maaranen (2020) maintain "the craft of teaching cannot be separated from practical wisdom" (p. 619). Vontz and Goodson (2020) agree, specifying teachers require practical wisdom in order to act ethically, have solid reasons for their actions, and then act in right ways. Offering a stronger argument on the need for *phronesis* (practical wisdom), Pickup (2020) advocates educators implement *phronesis* as the framework for educational practice: "*Phronesis* requires educators to consider the practical wisdom involved in engaging the complexity of lived contexts in which teaching and learning occur, rather than simply rely[ing] on decontextualizing notions of scientific rationality such as 'data-driven decision-making'" (p. 9).

Adopting *phronesis* to teaching counters the notion of teaching as a predominately skills-oriented, mechanical, or technological endeavor (Furman, 2016). While teachers rely upon technologies and therefore need a degree of technological expertise, technology and technological expertise alone cannot appropriately counter most teaching challenges (Hadjipanteli, 2018). Instead of automated, technological responses meeting situational challenges, the right course of action requires the teacher deliberate before selecting that action; the right course of action emerges from the teacher's virtue in striving for the mean or intermediate state when selecting that action (1106b10–15). The virtuous teacher uses *phronesis* (practical wisdom) to deliberate, select, and aim for the right action to achieve the desired end, the golden mean: "Again, the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as moral virtue; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means" (1144a5–10). Combining *phronesis* and moral virtue to address classroom situations and educate students requires the teacher to use his/her full human powers.

Because one lives the virtuous life by understanding the meaning and value of the virtuous end desired and by practicing, deliberating, and selecting the right end to achieve the mean, becoming a phronetic teacher similarly requires such understanding and phronetic practice. Therefore, it only makes sense for future teachers to begin work toward such understanding

and phronetic practice in their teacher education programs. To do so, teacher educators will need to centralize within their programs students' growth and development in phronetic teaching, thereby leading to their own, their students', and those future teachers' future students' *eudaimonia*. Although teacher-education programs typically include field experiences through which future teachers might foster phronetic growth, development, and practice, teacher educators often fail to include ethics, ethical decision-making, and content facilitating one's growth and development in practical wisdom. Teacher educators often ignore ethics, morals, and certainly the "moral middle" targeted after deliberating a real-world or real-classroom quandary, requiring more than formal, rule-oriented responses but a considered selection of right action for the quandary at hand. To correct for this lack in teacher education programs, Kristjánsson (2024) suggests integrating case studies about workplace dilemmas and challenges into program curricula with the aim of students' becoming *virtue literate* or skilled in identifying virtues and effectively applying them to resolving dilemmas, challenges, and problems within a particular context and set of circumstances. Grappling with problems presented in case studies, future teachers would aim for particular ends, deliberate over situations, and select right actions, ultimately achieving the moral middle. Using *orthos logos* (right reason), future teachers will become practically wise, magnify the strength of their moral virtues, have experience recognizing the mean in each case study, and achieve virtue literacy. As in-service teachers, they will continue to strengthen their teaching-morally acumen, become morally sensitive teachers in their "constitutive function" (Kristjánsson, 2024, p. 1036), and come to recognize the moral or ethical issues involved in teaching and learning situations.

A case-study example might focus on a middle-school teacher who daily interacts with a student who disrupts the class through his outbursts, his jumping out of his chair, pulling girls' hair, and tapping his pencil on his desk. Given scenarios, preservice teachers would then choose the desired end, deliberate on all the virtues to arrive at the best way to reach that end, select the right action to achieve the desired end (Kristjánsson et al., 2021), and determine the intensity appropriate to the situation. In this case study, the future teacher might select the moral virtue, patience/good temper, the mean between anger's excess (irascibility) and its deficiency (spiritlessness/unirascibility). Patience/good temper requires one to temper one's anger taking the student's developmental age, possible mental health issues, and what appears to be ADHD into account. Harsh consequences would be unjust considering the context from which the child's behavior emerges. The end from such consequences, ostracizing the student and making the student dislike the subject matter, coming to class, and learning, would be a negative, counterproductive end. Aristotle stipulates the virtue's intensity applies to a particular situation, here a particular child, the child's specific circumstances and behaviors, the child and those behaviors in a given classroom with a single teacher and group of fellow students. Another

situation might demand a more or a less extensive degree of anger—a different mean for a different set of circumstances. The teacher, or in this case future teacher, uses *phronesis* to select the mean (virtue) or correct intensity for the virtue in the specific situation. Through this phronetic thinking, the teacher experiences a “clearing” (Sachs, n.d.) or further clarity about the situation. This “clearing” guides teachers to discovering the mean for their own and their students’ good. Going one step further, Sachs (n.d.) contends when one chooses the mean, one sees “what is in front of... [one] in all its possibility” (n.p.). Thus, *phronesis* means the future teachers in this scenario not only practice considering a situation’s dimensions and experience a “clearing,” the two together guide the future teacher to the mean, wisely to select a right action, resulting in the child’s modifying his behavior while still desiring to attend class, enjoy the subject, and to learn. The cherry: future teachers see “what is in front of... [them] in all its possibility” (Sachs, n.d., n.p.) for this scenario and every other case study in which they engage!

Given *phronesis*’s sensitive and deliberative nature, especially in educational contexts, teachers (*phronimos*) are not external figures in children’s learning processes but integral forces facilitating students’ growth, development, and flourishing (Popovska, 2024). In working this case study, the future teacher who only considers the virtue of temperance when deliberating and selecting is short-sighted rather than a virtuous, effective agent who thinks expansively and with vision for his/her own and the children’s—not just one child’s—good. When embracing Aristotle’s concept, *phronesis*, growing and developing the virtue in oneself through practice, teachers aim toward realizing the good life for themselves and their students (Sternberg & Maraanan, 2022). When engaging with students, teachers teaching phronetically toward virtuous means and ends, see each child in the class and education writ large in all their possibilities—itsself an inspiring, virtuous mean and end!

However easy achieving the good life may sound, Aristotle readily concedes the virtuous life to be difficult to realize. Future teachers and in-service teachers will inevitably find deliberating on the right course of action strenuous, difficult, and requiring constant practice especially because it is far easier to select the excess or deficit than to determine and select the mean for a given situation. Educators practicing *phronesis* must therefore be opened to self-cultivation (Higgins, 2011) when practicing *phronesis*: “... [*phronesis*] both forms and is formed by the character and experience of the *phronimos*, the one whose practice is based upon... [*phronesis*]” (Spence, 2007, p. 316). Hence, the teacher, as the *phronimos*, develops and is developed by his/her own teaching practice.

Conclusion

Considering teaching as an example of how to achieve the good life through Aristotle’s concept of *eudaimonism* humanizes, ennobles, and gives

moral purpose to the profession. Although improving skills, developing teaching techniques, and acquiring professional knowledge are not anathema to the flourishing teacher, many serious educators long to redeem teaching from devolving into technicism mired in bureaucracy, both ways to alienate teachers from their students. If educators fail to channel their longing into a bold, cogent virtue ethics for teaching, teachers will likely be unable to break the profession away from its current ills, manifesting in teachers' apathy and malaise and schooling's disfunction. Applying Aristotle's concepts, *eudaimonism* and *phronesis*, to teaching broadens and deepens the meaning and value of teaching as a moral enterprise, focusing on human flourishing—*eudaimonism*—the good life with endless possibilities.

Endnote

- 1 The mean appears in ancient Greek thought as “nothing in excess,” a Delphic maxim about which Plato writes in *Philebus*. Aristotle analyzes the mean, introducing “the golden mean” in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II.

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