

φronesis

Reflections on practical wisdom

University of Chicago
March 1-2, 2024



Friday, March 1

9:00	Coffee/Breakfast
9:30-10:00	Opening remarks: Anastasia Giannakidou , Frank J. McLoraine Professor of Linguistics; Director, Center for Hellenic Studies; Co-Director, Center for Gesture, Sign, and Language; Faculty Fellow, Institute on the Formation of Knowledge. Paul Alivisatos , President of the University of Chicago; John D. MacArthur Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Chemistry.
10:00-12:00	Phronesis: philosophical underpinnings C.D.C Reeve , University of North Carolina. Pavlos Kontos , University of Patras, Greece. Chair and commentary: Matt Landauer , University of Chicago.
12:00-13:00	Lunch Break
13:00-15:00	Phronesis: Phronesis in the polis Josiah Ober , Stanford University. Jean Baptiste Gourinat , CNRS. Chair and commentary: Gabriel Lear , University of Chicago.
15:00-15:30	Coffee break
15:30-17:30	Phronesis: Phronesis and philosophy of science Philippe Hunneman , Institut d'Histoire et de Philosophie des Sciences et des Techniques (CNRS/ Université Paris 1 Sorbonne). Matthieu Husson , Systèmes de Référence Temps Espace (SYRTE), CNRS, Observatoire de Paris, Sorbonne Université. Chair and commentary: Jason Bridges , University of Chicago.
18:00	Dinner

Saturday, March 2

9:00	Coffee/Breakfast
9:00-11:00	Phronesis: Phronesis in Organizations, Management and Policy Making Phoebe Kountouris , Athens University of Economics and Business, Denmark Technical University, Academia Europaea. Nikitas Pittis , University of Piraeus. Nancy E. Snow , University of Kansas. Chair and commentary: Howard Nussbaum , University of Chicago.
11:00-11:30	Break
11:30-13:00	Phronesis: Phronesis in psychology and education Kristján Kristjánsson , University of Birmingham. Christine Noille , Sorbonne. Chair and Comment: Christopher Wild , University of Chicago.
13:00-15:00	Lunch break
15:30-17:00	Phronesis: Phronesis, language, and mass communication Sorin Adam Matei , Purdue. Alda Mari , CNRS, Institut JeanNicod. Chair and commentary: Anastasia Giannakidou , University of Chicago.
18:00	Dinner

C. D. C. Reeve

The Structure of Practical Wisdom.

Description: To have practical wisdom (phronêsis) one must have the virtues of character. Practical wisdom is the same state of the soul as political science (politikê). The tensions created by these two facts about practical wisdom are explored and a resolution of them proposed.

Pavlos Kontos

Phronêsis and Hope

Aristotle has explored the ways in which we anticipatively recognize, explore, appraise, and deal with “moral luck.” Luck is not simply a scandal that calls for retrospective judgments and tests our proneness to feel bad for things we did unwillingly or our readiness to compensate others for the harms we unintentionally caused them. It becomes a vital concern of our active engagement with the world of practical matters. Aristotle’s questions are: Who is really capable of discerning bad luck from good luck? What is a virtuous and what a vicious engagement with luck? What has moral luck to do with the temporality of action? What kind of ethical deficiency or impairment is the cause of our incapacity to correctly accommodate luck in our actions and plans? Which is the pertinent paradigmatic virtue and of what type (ethical or intellectual) is it?

I will investigate Aristotle’s notion of elpis (hope) to answer the above questions. Hope, for Aristotle—and correctly so, as I will argue—, is not an emotion or feeling, but the excellence of our future-directed practical sight that allows us to reconcile the resilience of our character traits and the hospitality of the world with our undertakings. Such hoping-well is nothing else but an accomplishment that only the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (phronêsis) is capable of.

Josiah Ober

Practical reason before Aristotle.

In a recent book (Ober 2022) I sought to recover a Greek intellectual tradition concerned with instrumental rationality, understood as means to ends reasoning: aka practical reason. Systematic theorizing about practical reason began with the Sophists and historians and was incorporated into the Socratic tradition, in Xenophon’s treatises, Plato’s dialogues as well as, ultimately, in Aristotelian phronesis. Unlike the well-known Socratic concern with the rationality of ends (“reason’s own desire”), theories of instrumental rationality make no strong claims about the intrinsic value of the ends that are sought by individual or collective agents, or about the psychological origins of desires. Instrumentalism is concerned with rational choice-making under conditions of uncertainty. It aims to discover the available option that maximizes the agent’s expectation of utility (however defined by the agent). In many cases this requires the choice-making agent to account for the preferences and beliefs of other individual and collective agents and the relative likelihood of possible outcomes. As such, the method resembles a non-mathematical form of what is now called game theory. My paper will draw from the book, seeking to clarify its central argument.

Jean Baptiste Gourinat

The Stoic notion of phronesis within the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions

The Stoics did not endorse the Aristotelian distinction between the ethical and the noetic virtues but, in line with their Socratic inspiration, deemed all the virtues to be phroneseis or forms of knowledge (epistemai). They also adopted and even contributed to standardize the Platonic classification of the cardinal virtues, that includes phronesis as a species. Thus, they hesitated between a general and a specific sense of phronesis, and between a Socratic-Platonic sense of phronesis in reaction to Aristotle's views and a more specific sense in which phronesis regulates actions and 'duties' (the kathekonta). In Stoicism, the Aristotelian importance of phronesis was not lost but was given a different function and a different position. The views of the Stoics, in turn, reshaped the later Platonic and Aristotelian traditions.

Philippe Huneman

Phronèsis from an evolutionary viewpoint: costs, benefits and minimal rationality.

Current decision theory has arguably elaborated a description of what philosophers used to call 'practical rationality' in terms of maximisation of a cost-benefit ratio. This has been implemented in evolutionary biology, within the subfield of « behavioral ecology », by using the notion of fitness as a metrics for costs and benefits, and by importing tools from game theory when strategic interactions are considered (i.e., actions, such that their payoffs depend upon what others are doing) (Maynard-Smith 1982). In this context, similarities between economics and evolutionary biology can be developed (as analysed in Andre et al. 2006). Therefore, some researchers tried to account for practical rationality in naturalistic terms, as a result of natural selection itself. This would result in a natural history of phronèsis, and also in an extension of phronesis towards many non-human animal species.

Even though one could discuss whether those theoretical developments are still faithful to an aristotelian inspiration, the present talk will only consider the rationale for such accounts and assess their prospects as a general framework for understanding phronesis.

Matthieu Husson

Prudentia est memoria, intelligentia, et providentia: Prudence and the temporality of late medieval astronomical practices.

In the last decades, the 'practical turn' in history of sciences produced an extensive scholarship showing in multiple cases how knowledge is dependent on complex networks of human beings, natural species, objects and phenomena. In these studies, the material dimension of scientific practices is a central means to study the local epistemic cultures entangled in these networks. The temporality of scientific practices, as perceived by historical actors, is comparatively, less addressed by historians of sciences in spite of the fact that it seems to be also a key element in understanding local epistemic cultures. This is especially clear for astrological and astronomical practices which are somehow intrinsically concerned with time and temporality. In this presentation, I wish to explore the potential of the notion of prudentia as a tool to analyze the temporality of late medieval astronomical practices attested in Latin sources. In particular, I will rely on Aquinas' (and Cicero's) view of prudentia, as composed of memoria, intelligentia and providentia to identify different facets of the sources bearing to the way they articulate a specific relation to time.

Phoebe Kountouris

Exploring the Impact of Real Environmental Disasters on Resource Allocation Preferences.

This study employs a natural experiment approach by harnessing the occurrence of actual environmental disasters to investigate their influence on individuals' economic and environmental preferences. Leveraging a nationally representative sample comprising more than 2,000 participants, we conduct three consecutive waves of experiments—before and after environmental disasters unfold. Our findings reveal a significant shift in resource allocation preferences; following recent environmental disasters, individuals allocate a substantially larger proportion of total resources towards mitigating and preparing for such calamities in the future.

Notably, we uncover that this effect is transient: when assessing the impact of past disasters from several years ago before a new catastrophe occurs, the influence on resource allocation preferences is minimal. Additionally, we analyse the relationship between environmental preferences and fundamental economic preferences, such as attitudes toward risk, time, and ambiguity. In the context of ambiguity, Kountouri et al. (2023) have developed a theoretical framework for pinpointing the origins of Ellsberg-type choices. They propose an innovative approach that relies on counterfactual priors and Bayesian updating to tackle ambiguity aversion. We also test whether participants initially establish prior beliefs and subsequently update them with new information, ambiguity aversion becomes less prevalent among participants.

The implications of our results are critical for the accurate measurement of individuals' willingness to pay (WTP) for environmental goods. Moreover, our study opens new avenues for comparing the effects of these real-world events to virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) simulations. The next step in our research is the development of debiasing strategies to enable more precise preference elicitation and informed decision-making.

Nancy E. Snow

Phronêsis and Provosts: How Phronêsis can help Administrators Enact Change in Higher Education.

It is hardly a secret that many higher educational institutions are hurting. Among the ills currently faced are problems with faculty morale, tenure in jeopardy, the rise of the use of temporary adjuncts who are underpaid and overworked, the ongoing siloization of different units, an increased focus on assessment and numerical “bean-counting” at the expense of more robust values, and the rise of the “hard sciences” at the expense of the humanities. Even if leaders in higher education acknowledge these as problems to be addressed, the resources available to them are often scant and conceptually thin. The aim of this presentation is to examine how Aristotelian phronêsis can be used by higher level administrators to promote institutional change through cultivating sets of virtues and values in their institutions. I will use as a case study the example of the Provost of the University of Kansas, Dr. Barbara A. Bichelmeyer, who, in my view, uses phronêsis or a very similar form of reasoning to approach values-based change at my present institution. Phronêsis provides a sophisticated way of thinking about values that offers a framework for collective long-term change geared toward institutional flourishing or eudaimonia. The flourishing of higher educational institutions, I’ll argue, cannot be attained without attentiveness to the flourishing of the societies of which they’re parts.

Kristján Kristjánsson

Teaching practical wisdom: new developments.

In the first part of the talk, I explain the construct of *phronesis* as it has been developing in the literatures on moral psychology and moral/character education. I then elaborate on attempts to "measure" *phronesis* development (e.g., pre-and-post educational interventions). I end by exploring the Aristotelian concept of collective *phronesis* from his *Politics* and its educational implications.

Christine Noille

La prudence en rhétorique: éthos, pathos, logos.

Sorin Adam Matei

Digital Phronesis: The practical wisdom of networked lives.

Over the last two decades, the yarn of our lives has been threaded through the weft of digital networks. A new social compact has emerged that we did not anticipate or even understand very well. We gave ourselves to others, often strangers or unaware of their presence. In exchange, we got an audience for our opinions or a support network for our needs and worries. With the benefits of an enhanced presence in the world came the cost of exposure to public ridicule or worse. Is this trade-off worth it? In this presentation, I propose that the give and take brought about by a networked digital life is the essence of our new life.

Furthermore, I will argue that the new life rooted in choices and trade-offs demands practical wisdom rather than a quest for Manichean certainties. Digital life is, in other words, *phronesis* ready. The argument will focus on three examples of central trade-offs involved in the digital, networked lifestyle: security vs. privacy, collective embeddedness vs. individualistic affirmation, and freedom of expression vs. collective efficacy.

Alda Mari

The pragmatic distortions of truth and trust in social networks.

(Joint work with Marie Boscaro and Anastasia Giannakidou)

Gaining and maintaining trust through communication entails a first necessary step of determining the veridicality of the utterances exchanged by the interlocutors, whether they are assessed as true or not. The linguistic veridicality framework (Giannakidou and Mari 2021) posits linguistic devices serve as clues to forming and recognizing the veridicality judgment. For instance, if my doctor utters the bare assertion "The virus has spread" and shows me the scan, I will trust him and take the event of the virus spreading to be true (veridical). However qualified variants involving, for instance, modality ('might') such as "The virus might have spread" weaken the claim by adding uncertainty (non-veridicality). Evidence plays a central role in determining veridicality judgments and in triggering different formulations. The doctor will use the bare assertion if she has reliable evidence while she will prefer the modal formulation if the evidence is partial, indirect or non-sufficiently reliable.

This talk studies the distortions of the grounding of veridicality judgments in social networks, in the perspective of rhetorical pragmatics as referring to linguistic behavior among non-rational and non-

cooperative agents. Based on a corpus study of over 4000 tweets, it shows that, in social networks, assertions are ground in very poorly reliable evidence, and that modal statements are issued even when based on evidence as unreliable as rumors. Overall, we show that epistemic vigilance, as revealed by the use of bare and modal assertions, is lowered in comparison with the standards adopted among rational agents, and that trustworthiness can follow even from almost complete absence of proof.