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Can Aristotle's *Phronimos* return? The revival of interest in Aristotle's *phronesis* in political philosophy/theory

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This article explores the contemporary revival of interest in Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, practical wisdom. It commences by analysing this ancient intellectual virtue, its relation to Aristotle's moral virtues and the role that philosophy occupies in his understanding of political science and the nature of politics. Following this, the factors, both practical and theoretical, that account for efforts to reincarnate the *Phronimos* (the man of practical wisdom) in our time is examined. The analysis subsequently identifies transhistoricist political theory which, unlike other forms of theorising, explicitly sets itself the goal to recover from the past an understanding of *phronesis* and instances of practical wisdom that can potentially be of use in contemporary times. In closing, some of the cognitive, political and practical obstacles that must be bypassed for political philosophy/theory to realise such a goal is explored and appraised.

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In ancient Greek thought, the Phronimos is a mythical figure associated with Aristotle's notion of phronesis, the intelligent reason of practical wisdom that informs and guides prudent action. This man of practical wisdom can, metaphorically speaking, enter the concreteness of our lives and sympathetically and figuratively show us the mean relative to ambiguous moral situations which may differ for different practical cases and for different persons in similar cases. The moral insight of the Phronimos thus represents the manifestation of phronesis, an intellectual virtue that, for Aristotle, actualises the moral excellences in human character, the virtues of the human soul.¹ While phronesis pre-dates Aristotle in Socrates and Plato, Aristotle's account of phronesis in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), in particular, elevated prudence to ethical prominence in the Western philosophical and political tradition. In this sense, the enduring significance of phronesis in this tradition can, among others, be attributed to Aristotle locating individual judgement, and thereby prudence and freedom, at the centre of the public domain of the polis. Conceiving of an individualistic intellectual virtue that informs practical political judgement in a moral sense is at the heart of Aristotle's political science (*episteme politike*), first taught to wealthy young Athenian men in his Lyceum in the fourth century BC (see Mara 1987).

Aristotelian *phronesis* is, however, not as elementary as the preceding paragraph suggests. It is a complex category that must be understood within the wider framework of Aristotle's thoughts, given the interconnectedness of his various works. As an intellectual virtue that enables prudent individual practical judgement, it has intrigued the minds of some of history's greatest scholars and aspects thereof still remain contested.² These contested issues pertain to the very nature of *phronesis* itself, its role and functions with regard to personal, household and state management, its relation to all the moral virtues of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, its invoking of other Aristotelian thoughts on aspects such as rhetoric, poetics, hermeneutics and aesthetics, and its potential reliance on, and relation to, other intellectual virtues such as insight (*nous*), technical knowledge or know-how (*techné*), science (*episteme*), belief or opinion (*doxa*) and, in particular, the wisdom of

1 <<http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/490/intellectvirtues.htm>>

2 One of the best known modern controversies on the nature of Aristotelian *phronesis* is the debate between Habermas and Gadamer (see McGee 1982).

philosophy (*sophia*). In a metaphorical sense, the latter set of potential reliances on, and the relation of *phronesis* to, other cognitive sources raises the question as to whether the *Phronimos* symbolically represents links between practical wisdom and other orders of discourse, or whether, in the strict Aristotelian sense, such knowledge is innate and intrinsic to the individual acting with the phronetic intelligence of practical wisdom itself. How this matter is understood is viewed as crucial to the so-called divide in the theory-practice problem in contemporary social and political science, given the consistent calls for a return to a more phronetic type of inquiry that has emanated from ranks of these and related fields dating back to at least a period prior to the outbreak of the Second World War and culminating in the so-called *perestroika* revolt in American political science during 2000.

While the *phronesis* revival will be addressed in some detail later, it should be mentioned at the outset that Aristotle did not believe that all or most citizens possessed this intellectual virtue, or that they were capable of exercising it. His undemocratic views on this matter are in contrast to those of some revivalists who believe that most or all citizens should exercise *phronesis* to counteract the homogenising effects of instrumental and technical reason that dehumanises individuals in the climate of impersonal relativism that characterises postmodern societies. To the extent that the popular democratisation of *phronesis* may alter its original nature, this possible alteration of *phronesis* itself becomes an issue in the groundswell of revivalist calls seemingly motivated by primarily practical political considerations. Simultaneously, however, the revivalist calls also represent a theoretical dimension with regard to the theory-practice divide. Some of the most prominent scholars of recent times are seen to share the common vision of Aristotelian *phronesis*, and their understanding of its renaissance is premised on the recovery of individual political judgement and its associated moral virtues as originally conceived by Aristotle. Prominent scholars deemed to share this common vision include, among others, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jurgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Richard Rorty, Michael Oakshott, John Henry Newman and Robin George Collingwood (Tabachnick 2004: 997-8).

This article aims to explore some aspects of the theory-practice issue that underlies the so-called *phronesis* revival. These can be subsumed under the metaphorical question of whether the *Phronimos*

can be reincarnated in the political thought and behaviour of postmodern times. The exploration is of necessity selective, since the renewed interest in Aristotle's *phronesis* straddles many fields of inquiry, ranging from biomedical ethics, business ethics, education, philosophy of science, communication science, political and moral philosophy, as well as rhetoric, hermeneutics, poetics and aesthetics as constituent elements of some of these fields.³ A general exploration of the nature of Aristotelian *phronesis* is followed by the role of the *Phronimos* and how these relate to ethics and the moral virtues, politics, individual judgement and action. This is followed by a review of some of the factors that contribute to the *phronesis* revival, as well as the differences and similarities, both socio-political as well as cognitive, that characterise the ancient Greek context and postmodern societies that may hinder or facilitate phronetic politics in our time.

Next, the discussion turns to more specific scholarly orientations that question, respectively, the desirability of using *phronesis* in our time, and arguments in favour of the possibility and desirability that this ancient phronetic mode of political judgement can be recovered. In these scholarly arguments, the constituent cognitive elements of *phronesis* seem to be crucial. How this is understood determines whether theory can indeed inform practice by synthesising the knowing 'about' with the knowing 'how', the 'what to do' with the 'how to do', or whether the nature of *phronesis* itself opens up unbridgeably the divide between theory and practice, separating the 'what' and the 'how' into separate and independent fields of knowledge, intellectual discourse, and practice. Stated differently, it raises the issue whether the *Phronimos* figuratively fuses theory and practice in the phronetic actor at the moment of deciding and acting, or whether the *Phronimos* is the figurative and symbolic link between the *phronesis* of the actor and additional supplementary external sources of knowledge, such as philosophy, for example. This aspect, therefore, explores the autonomy and self-sufficiency of *phronesis* to bridge the theory-practice divide, or whether theory and practice are, by virtue of the nature of *phronesis*, shifted apart by separating the actor and action from knowledge

3 For business ethics, see Duska 1993; for education, see Barr 2011; for philosophy of science and hermeneutics, see Gallagher n.d.; for communication science, see Farrell 1993; for rhetoric, see Smith 2003 and Abizadeh 2002; for poetics, see Wall 2003 and for aesthetics, see Haney 1999.

required for this purpose. The article concludes with some remarks on the viability of recovering phronetic politics in present times.

1. *Phronesis*

From its Greek origins, *phronesis* was translated into the Latin of the legalised Roman world as *prudentia* from which *jurisprudencia* is derived, literally meaning to apply a law to a particular case. It also contains the root of the English term 'prudence'. In German, Gadamer initially translated *phronesis* as *praktisches Wissen*, practical knowing or wisdom. At a later stage, he proposed *phronesis* to mean "*die Wachsamkeit der Sorge um sich selbst*" (the watchfulness care for oneself) (Dottori 2009: 301, 306). In English, the most widely used translation of *phronesis* is *practical wisdom*; yet alternatives such as practical cleverness, reason or intelligence have been proposed. Tabachnick (2004: 999) suggested that Aristotle's description of practical reason being "a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods" reflects the essential features of the notion, since it is based on reason; it entails action and presupposes an understanding of human goods.⁴

The preceding translations and the excerpt from the *NE*, however, do not reveal a great deal about the nature of *phronesis*, its cognitive elements and its moral intent. Our understanding of the nature of the Aristotelian intellectual virtue of *phronesis* is complicated by at least two considerations. The first, to which we have already referred, is the interconnected nature of Aristotle's works. This makes it difficult to infer definitive meaning from sections in his texts, since these are often qualified elsewhere, or related to aspects discussed previously and often in entirely different works. This requirement that sections of text must be understood in terms of more general ideas is one that will be evident at a later stage in this article, since it cannot be addressed at the outset of the exploration. The second consideration is that many terms in classical Greek do not have corresponding equivalents in the English language; the concept of *phronesis* is a case in point. Inferring the meaning of *phronesis* from its translations in English only is, therefore, difficult and, in addition, complicated by the fact that Aristotle, as the case is with so many of his thoughts,

4 See Aristotle 1994-2009, *NE* Book VI.5.

does not provide us with a single all-encompassing definition of what the term *phronesis* entails. In this respect, we follow McGee's account of, in particular, Gadamer in the Gadamer-Habermas debate on this concept. Gadamer is not only a philosopher, but also a classical philologist, and the account's explanation of classical Greek terms serves the purpose of our exploration very well.⁵

Aristotle distinguishes between various types of knowledge, of which four are relevant in this instance, namely *doxa*, *techne*, *phronesis*, and *episteme*.⁶ English has only three terms, namely *opinion*, *belief*, and *knowledge* that approximate the meanings of the four types distinguished by Aristotle. The Greek *doxa* covers both the meaning of *opinion* and *belief*, leaving the term *knowledge* to cover the different meanings of *techne*, *episteme* and *phronesis*. English has no equivalent for *phronesis*, and whatever translation is used for it must, in addition, keep it separate from conveying the meanings of *techne* and *episteme*, for which there are no satisfactory equivalents either.⁷

What obfuscates meaning in English then is the distinction between *techne*, *episteme* and *phronesis*. These are at the heart of Aristotle's division of knowledge into three categories, namely productive, theoretical and practical. Cabinet-making is an example of *techne* and it requires productive knowledge of the techniques of the artist's craft to produce a tangible object. Theoretical knowledge, *episteme*, finds its counterpart in modern scientific knowledge and concerns itself with certainties, necessary truths that cannot be otherwise than what they are; their truth can be demonstrated. Practical knowledge, *phronesis*, is the use of reason to grasp the truth of what is good or bad for a human being in a situation that requires action. *Techne* and *phronesis* also differ from each other in terms of the relation posited between means and ends. In the former, the end produced by art or craft is separated from the craftsman's technique, irrespective of both being predetermined. In the latter, the ethical action in pursuit of the good performed by the *Phronimos* is its own end, a matter that cannot be determined in advance (Haney 1999: 32-3; Dottori 2009: 304).

5 For an overview of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarly debates on the contested meaning of Aristotelian *phronesis*, see Bodéüs 1993: 27-38. See also McGee 1982.

6 See Aristotle 1994-2009, *NE* Book VI.

7 See McGee 1982.

It is important to note Aristotle's thought that scientific knowledge, *episteme*, could be developed for a much wider range of fields than what is thought to be the case in our time. For him, ethics was one such a field. The science of morality was thought to be able to rationally demonstrate, as *episteme* requires, the good without regard for practical limitations such as, in fact, being good. In this sense, the good is conceived in pure form, whereas reality reduces morality and the good to a matter of practical possibility. McGee (1982) writes that, for Aristotle, the "*episteme* of ethics, [...] is the business of philosophy, and the *phronesis* of ethics is the business of politics. The distance between the two kinds of knowledge is the same as the distance between theory and practice". The bridging of the divide between theory and practice thus takes place when whatever is known about the good (*episteme*) is mediated and translated by the *Phronimos* into that which can be achieved and realised within the restrictions of historical and unique practical situations (*phronesis*).⁸

This understanding of the bridging of theory and practice, the transformation of philosophy into politics, was at the heart of one of the major intellectual disputes of Aristotle's time. It pertains, figuratively speaking, to a claim of superior practicality by the *Deinos*, the man who possesses knowledge of *techne* and who uses rhetoric as a technology of persuasion to foster an illusion of good that is ignorant of both *episteme* and *phronesis*, philosophy and politics. Historically, and for both Plato and Aristotle, the *deinos* symbolically represents the beliefs and practices of fifth-century BC rhetoricians. If you believe, as many of these rhetoricians thought, "that 'being practical' is simply keeping the machinery of everyday practices in good working order, and once in a while improving their efficiency, you have associated practical knowledge with *techne* rather than *phronesis*, and you have taken the risk of becoming a *deinos* rather than a *phronimos*".⁹ The *Deinos* represents a debased variety of moral knowledge:

[H]e is a man who has all the natural prerequisites and skills for this moral knowledge, a man who is able, with remarkable skill, to get the most out of any situation, who is able to seize his advantage everywhere and finds a way out of every situation. But this natural counterpart to *phronesis* is characterized by the fact that he exercises

8 See McGee 1982; Smith 2003; Berti 2000; Tabachnick 2004; Johnstone 2006.

9 See McGee 1982.

his gifts without being led in any way by moral being and hence without inhibitions and without any orientation towards moral ends. And it is probably more than accidental that such a person is given a name that also means 'terrible'.¹⁰

This distinction between the *Deinos* and the *Phronimos*, the perverse use of rhetoric rather than *episteme* to inform action, inspired Aristotle to not only attempt the recovery of the prudent use of rhetoric,¹¹ but also clearly distinguish *phronesis*, as practised by the *Phronimos*, from *techne*, as used by the *Deinos*. *Phronesis* presupposes an element of wisdom that is absent in the technical mastery implied by *techne*. The latter consists of habituated familiarity with techniques of application required by the action. By contrast, the *Phronimos* has no clear and certain rules to follow in decisions that must be made, for each different situation excepts notions of what ought to be in pursuit of what is right and good. He learns from his experience of learning in each and every case. In the case of *techne*, the relation between means and ends is constant. Cabinetry or the use of rhetoric does not require the learning of a new technology or technique to produce a product or outcome every time it is used. If it is required for the purpose of improvement, a new set of rules need only be learned once, but this is not the case with the *Phronimos*. His actions are a process rather than a product, always aspiring to the good, but never achieving its full realisation, its *telos*. This is why *phronesis* is an ontic aspect and not an aspect of *episteme*. The *Phronimos* extends his whole being into all situations and relationships; he "does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather as one united by a specific bond with the other", as one who "thinks with the other and undergoes the situation with the other".¹²

The ancient quarrel between political theory and the type of knowledge that should inform it dates back to at least Socrates. In his *Republic* (*REP*), Plato registers Socrates' banning of poetry from the just city ruled by philosophers (The Internet Classics Archive,

10 See McGee 1982; Gadamer 1982: 288-9; Johnstone 2006: 284; Tabachnick 2004: 1002-4; 1013 note 11.

11 For an overview of the Aristotelian concept of the *enthymeme* and its persuasive role in rhetoric, see Faure 2010. For the moral stance of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, see Nichols 1987.

12 See McGee 1982; Gadamer 1982: 283-8.

REP Book X). Fish (1987: 483-4) is of the opinion that the quarrel mentioned by Plato is one between philosophy and rhetoric and that the history of Western thought could be understood in terms of this quarrel. It is a quarrel whereby philosophy, the fortress of essence, fears its invasion by rhetoric, "by the contingent, the protean, and the unpredictable" (Nichols 1996: 3100).

Aristotle's response to the dangers and evil that a political theory informed by the rhetoric of *techne* could harbour differed from that of his teacher predecessors Plato and Socrates. He uniquely conceived of a political science (*episteme politike*) wherein the *Phronimos* infuses political action with moral notions of the good, as contained in philosophy (*episteme*) that is qualified by practical considerations of what is attainable within the confines of possibility. In broad outline, this Aristotelian understanding of political theory inspires the *phronesis* revival in modern and postmodern social and political thought. Its disillusionment with the effects of technical rationality on social and political thought is not unlike that of Plato who, in the fifth century BC, attacked "sophists' who perverted rhetoric by treating it strictly as a technology of persuasion" and, in the fourth century BC, Aristotle's "reconception of rhetoric, to insistence that any who mediate ethics and politics be imbued with the qualities of the *phronimos*"¹³ Before discussing the *phronesis* revival, let us continue our exploration of the nature of *phronesis* itself, among others the relation of this intellectual virtue to Aristotle's moral virtues and the locus of political judgement by the *Phronimos* in the *polis*.

2. *Phronesis* and moral virtue

The above discussion of *phronesis* as an intellectual virtue¹⁴ comprised only some references as to how *phronesis* relates to Aristotle's moral

13 See McGee 1982.

14 *Phronesis* is only one of Aristotle's intellectual virtues. In Book VI of the *NE* (see Aristotle 1994-2009, *NE* Book VI), he also outlines the intellectual virtues of intelligence (*nous*) (VI.6), science (*episteme*) (VI.3), wisdom (*sophia*) (VI.7), art (*techne*) (VI.4), understanding (*synesis*) (VI.10) and good sense (*gnome*) (VI.11). They differ from each other in the sense that *nous* affords direct insight into self-evident principles and definitions without demonstration or inference, whereas *episteme* concerns itself with objects that do not change, such as demonstrated conclusions. In turn, *sophia* concerns itself with things that are most highly

virtues. We may state that the former represents a disposition to reason and truth in pursuit of good actions, whereas the latter represents a disposition to desire that which is good. The relation between the two types of virtues, the intellectual and the moral, has been explained as being simultaneously that of unity and reciprocity. Their unity stems from the fact that all of Aristotle's moral virtues are specific instances of *phronesis*. Their reciprocity derives from the fact that, while Aristotle differentiates between the intellectual and the moral virtues, they are both mutually necessary. Similarly, the moral virtues also differ from each other, but the mutual necessity remains the same (Deslauriers 2002: 102). In moving to Aristotle's different moral virtues, wherein *phronesis* actualises action in pursuit of the good, we need to state that his rendering of the complex matter of the good in the *NE* is a kind of progressive development, and can be misleading if inferred from individual books of this work. For this reason, we first attend to Aristotle's respective moral virtues: "The virtues fall into the definition of *eudaimonia* but *eudaimonia* does not fall into the definition of the virtues. So the notion of virtue must be prior to the notion of *eudaimonia* and must be understood before *eudaimonia* can be understood" (Simpson 1992: 507). We shall return to the notion of the human good at a later stage to explore the relation of *phronesis* to the good and happiness, *eudaimonia* - the *telos* of human life. We shall now first explore the virtues.

Aristotle initially and conditionally defines the human good in terms of moral virtue and not moral virtue in terms of the human good. In the *NE*, Aristotle writes on virtue that

regarded and is, in a sense, a combination of *nous* and *episteme*. *Techne* concerns itself with production and differs from *phronesis* which is not concerned with production, but with good actions in pursuit of the good which is an end in itself. *Synesis* is a similar capacity to *phronesis* in that it comprehends the requirements of good action, but differs from the latter in that it may exist in situations that do not require commands to act. *Gnome* is the faculty that affords sympathetic understanding and the ability to forgive and to be righteous and fair (see Hoffman n.d.). It may be stated that *phronesis* may draw on the other intellectual virtues to a larger or lesser extent depending on the situation that requires action. In addition, it should be noted that many Aristotelian scholars contest the nature of the intellectual virtues themselves, as well as their interrelationship with other virtues.

... we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete (The Internet Classics Archive, *NE* Book I.7).

In this general description, we note that the activity of soul is in line with reason from which action ensues that reflects the search for excellence from that part of the soul that desires and longs for such a form of virtue. The description also provides us with an orientation, according to which we could gauge the extent to which individuals display excellence, as well as the degree of perfection of individual virtues that make up virtue as a whole. However, it is important to note that we contextualise this in Aristotle's understanding of the *polis* which was regarded not only as the guardian of the common good, but also as the civic educator that instilled virtue into the political community in order to make citizens both law-abiding as well as virtuously good. It is in this context that Aristotle understood the nobly educated living of the "morally serious (*spoudaios*)¹⁵ and prudent (*phronimos*) human" to be imbued with the "moral virtue (*ethike arete*) as the proper disposition with respect to action" (Collins 2004: 48).

In a general sense, the entire *NE* is devoted to grapple with the nature of the human good by explaining the moral virtues as dispositions of individual character. The virtues of character that are dealt with by Aristotle are pertinently outlined in Books II-V of his *NE*.¹⁶ Book II is a general overview of the virtues and how the golden mean between a deficient and an excessive manifestation of

15 "Such a person is (or tries to be) aware of what he/she should do in order to live well and to play a role in making the kind of society that is worth living in; and he/she does not drag his/her feet in performing these actions. Instead, this person is energetic and earnest in doing what needs to be done, as opposed to the person who does what is necessary only reluctantly and not in a timely way (this second person would not be *spoudaios*). This is not to say that the *spoudaios* person is all work and no play; as we'll see, part of living well is enjoying things and spending time with friends and family" (see *Ancient Greek Vocabulary: Aristotle*. <<http://classweb.gmu.edu/rcherubi/ancient/arovc.htm>>).

16 See Aristotle 1994-2009, *NE* Books II-V.

virtues represents the proper disposition of character virtue. The right reason or rational principle that the *Phronimos* seeks in pursuit of the moral virtues is a golden midway, “a ‘mean’ (*meson*) in relation to two vices, which are the excess and deficiency concerning what is fitting (*deon*), and it is a mean that accords with the rational principle (*logos*) defined by the prudent human being” (Collins 2004: 48). Books III to V outline the respective virtues in more detail and we list them, in this instance, in sequential order. The first is virtue of courage (*andreia*); its deficient format is cowardice and its excessive form is rashness. Temperance (*sōphrosunē*) is the virtue between the deficiency of insensibility and the excess of intemperance (Book III.6-12). Liberality (*eleutheriotēs*) is a virtue distinguished by its deficiency of illiberality and the excess of frugality (wastefulness). Munificence or magnificence (*megaloprepeia*) is a virtue with the deficient format of pettiness and an excessive format of vulgarity (tastelessness). Greatness or soul, or high-mindedness (*megalopsuchia*), is a virtue of character, with its vices of deficiency and excess being humble-mindedness and vanity, respectively. The virtue of having the right or appropriate ambition is characterised by a deficiency that can be described as a want of ambition and an excessive format that can be described as overambitiousness. The virtue of good temper or gentleness (*praotēs*) has the deficient counterpart of spiritedness and the excessive counterpart of irascibility. The virtue of friendliness (*philia*) has a vice of deficiency known as quarrelsomeness and a vice of excess known as obsequiousness. The virtue of sincerity or truthfulness (*alētheia*) has self-deprecating irony and boastfulness, respectively, as its vices of deficiency and excess. The virtue of wittiness (*eutrapelos*) is flanked by its deficient vice of boorishness and its excess of buffoonery (Book IV). With regard to modesty (Book IV) and fairness (justice) (Book V), scholars’ opinions differ as to whether these are true Aristotelian virtues. We cannot explore the matter in detail, in this instance,¹⁷ but those who regard them as virtues suggest that their respective deficient and excessive formats are shamelessness and callousness, on the one hand, and bashfulness and spitefulness, on the other.

The Aristotelian scholar Salkever (2007: 203) points out that Aristotle’s pedagogical method is to use fictitious exemplary figures

17 See Salkever’s (2007: 204) ten virtues and the twelve recognised by Lewis 2001.

to explain the different virtues, each animated by different visions of the human good. These figures are the manly man (*andreios*), the great-souled man (*megalopsuchos*), the just man (*dikaios*), the decent man (*epieikes*), the friend, and the theoretical man.¹⁸ The first two figures take the Periclean good of freedom, honour and greatness as their horizon, while the third and fourth base their vision on the public good. The fifth and sixth figures go beyond politics in dealing with human good as a goal in itself. The theoretical man attempts to transcend humanity in aspiring to adopt Aristotle's understanding of *theos* as the ultimate measure for virtue in man. Salkever (2007: 203) notes that the entire sequence of Aristotle's virtues described in his treatise has variously (but with teleological undertones) been described as portraying the growth of civilisation in moving from the need for manliness, sex and war to civility and, alternatively, as resembling virtues that increasingly make use of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to a way of life that seems to be beyond *phronesis*.

The above exposition also sheds light on the respective horizons of good of the fictitious figures outlined earlier, namely the horizon of the Periclean good of freedom, honour and greatness represented by the manly man and the great-souled man; the horizon of the public good represented by the just man and the decent man, and the horizon of going beyond politics to the very nature of the human good represented by the friend and the theoretical man. In terms of Aristotle's pedagogy, this suggests (see Salkever 2007: 210) that human freedom is outranked by the horizon of human law; that human law is outranked by the horizon of human beings, and that human beings are outranked by the horizon of being as such. In a sense, the character types of Aristotle's exemplary figures also stand in a particular relation to one another with regard to virtue. The manly man is outranked by the *megalopsuchos*; the just man outranks the *megalopsuchos*; the decent

18 Aristotle's misogynist, masculinist and xenophobic bias is well known and is ascribed to the historical practices and preferences that dominated thinking in ancient Greece. Many scholars deplore his use of the noun "man" in his writing, but it has not detracted neo-Aristotelian scholars, including feminists, to transpose the principles underlying his thought to contemporary circumstances and to also apply them equally to women. With regard to the extension and adaptation of ancient meaning to suit the features of the modern state and the changing role of women in politics, compare the work of women scholars such as Schwarzenbach 1996, 2009, Ward 2008, and Schwaetzer 2006.

man the just man; the friend the decent man, and the philosopher, the theoretical man is superior to the friend. Salkever points out that the ordering of horizons of good and their respective figures implied by Aristotle do not displace or supersede each other in a Hegelian sense: “[g]iven the unique and immense variety and contingency of human life, and given that we do not and cannot know or choose in advance the challenges our lives will set for us, each of them (as well as their relative rank order) must be kept in mind as a theoretical guide to the prohairesis life” (Salkever 2007: 210). Salkever (2007: 210-1) further points out that the relationship between the various horizons does not imply that the man of practical wisdom, the *Phronimos*, should stop caring about any one of the horizons, or to treat some things as the only good things; in a manner, these things are all good by nature. For him, Aristotle’s intention in ranking the virtues, their horizons of good and the exemplary figures is threefold: to rank the goods and horizons relative to the standard implicit in the activities of being; to warn that we should not take any one too seriously, or not seriously enough, and to make clear that theory cannot go beyond the first two points and that persons and communities must decide about the best mix of goods that is optimal and appropriate for them, that such decisions are not informed by philosophy, but primarily by *phronesis* that engages philosophy.

Salkever’s synopsis and appraisal of Aristotle’s virtues yield provisional answers to two issues alluded to earlier in this article, but not yet addressed thus far. The first concerns the ultimate cognitive source that the reason of *phronesis* relies on using the rational principle (*logos*) defined by the prudent *Phronimos* in seeking the mean of virtue in a particular situation that requires judgement. The second aspect is the progressive development of Aristotle’s thought on the good in his *NE*. These two issues are linked by the role of philosophy in Aristotle’s political science, in that he views politics and philosophy as being simultaneously separable and compatible with each other. Salkever’s remark that *phronesis* is primarily informed by engaging philosophy is the key to this link. It is, therefore, not entirely true that Aristotle constructs his ethics and political theory without reference to the Platonic activity of the highest part of the soul, namely the activity of philosophy or contemplation. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle does not conceive of politics where philosophers

rule, but he does require that those who rule occasionally engage and listen to the wisdom of philosophers (Simpson 1992: 523). Aristotle's appeals to the philosophic life are found in his *NE*, his *Politics*, as well as in his *Metaphysics*. We restrict ourselves to the *NE*. In Book X of this work, it appears that the authority of philosophy over politics in the mediation between these two forms of life is conclusively settled in favour of the former. Mara (1987: 378) assesses this cognitive authority of philosophy over politics, stating that

[t]his most praiseworthy human activity, fully or strictly understood, would appear to be possible completely apart from the city. The contemplative philosopher emerges as a kind of human god whose divinity is precisely a function of his or her noble independence from both the assistance provided and the demands imposed by politics.

This authority of philosophy over politics also confirms Salkever's explanation of the various horizons of the good that progressively culminate in philosophical contemplation as the ultimate horizon of the good and happiness, *eudaimonia*, the *telos* of human life.¹⁹

- 19 “[B]ut the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities; at all events the pursuit of it is thought to offer pleasures marvellous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is to be expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire. And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a philosopher, as well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessaries of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same case, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient. [...] So if among virtuous actions political and military actions are distinguished by nobility and greatness, and these are unpleasurable and aim at an end and are not desirable for their own sake, but the activity of reason, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible for man), and all the other attributes ascribed to the supremely happy man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that this will be the complete happiness of man, if it be allowed a complete term of life (for none of the attributes of happiness is incomplete)” (see Aristotle 1994-2009, *NE* Book X.7).

We need to qualify the compatibility of politics and philosophy by way of the *Phronimos* engaging and being informed by the latter. The cognitive priority of philosophy, as outlined in the *NE*, implies that, if *phronesis* is to provide political guidance on the best possible life, the most compelling advice would ultimately lead the *Phronimos* to the wisdom emanating from contemplation that requires the ability to choose between practical and theoretical excellences. Since Aristotle understands *phronesis* and, therefore, the *Phronimos* to be found at the levels of personal, household and state management (see Deslauriers 2002: 123), the issue arises as to whether choosing between the excellences is within the reach of all that are presumed to be prudently and practically wise. All men are not philosophers, but philosophy concerns itself with moral and political choices at the individual, communal and state levels. We must infer from this that philosophy may or may not be engaged by the *Phronimos* who does not live the life of contemplation; however, by engaging philosophy, such action by the practically wise makes the *polis* derivatively philosophical “because they temper their political activities with the broadly or analogously philosophic enjoyment of art and culture” (Mara 1987:380, Lord 1982: 191, 200-2).

We conclude our brief exploration of the relation between *phronesis* and the moral virtues in this section with two preliminary observations. The first is that *phronesis*, in Aristotle’s thinking, is indeed the unique form of knowledge that actualises his moral virtues in pursuit of the public, legal and human good in support of *eudaimonia*, but that only philosophy can actualise the latter. Aristotle indeed requires that the *Phronimos* implicitly needs an acquaintance with that supreme dimension of the human soul which only philosophy can provide, and this potentially makes him a theoretician of statecraft (see Mara 1987: 393). The second observation flows from the first and raises the question as to whether the *Phronimos*, in seeking a guide to action, encounters in the wisdom of philosophy a radically different and alternative life to that of the ethical life, as Tessitore (1996: 50) proposes, or whether, as Smith (2001: 272-84) argues, the two categories are ontologically coherent with one another (see Collins 2004: 59).

3. Contextualising the *phronesis* revival

Whereas prudence and ethics are concerned with what we ought to do individually, democratic politics is concerned with what we have to do collectively. Political philosophy/theory is concerned with both the former aspects, and this raises the question as to why many scholars in the decades following the Second World War have increasingly turned to ancient ideas of the long dead in order to recover the intelligence and prudence of practical wisdom and practical judgement for both the practice of politics as well as scholarly inquiry into the practice of politics itself. The answer to this question is no doubt complex. It appears that the dramatic changes in thinking about personal and public morality, religion, human relations, the role and influence of scientific and technical rationality, the growing acceptance of relativism in matters of morality and truth, increasing secularisation, materialism, individualisation and its concomitant alienation, and so on that were brought about by modernist and, in particular, postmodernist ideas and their influence frustrated and discouraged the exercise of, as well as scholarly inquiry into, conventional notions of prudence. The legal and political emancipation of minority groups and women via the extension of franchise; the increased sensitivity in which many governments deal with minorities, cultural diversity, ethnicity, individual, language and group rights; the homogenising effect of technical and scientific reason on the particularities and uniqueness of cultures and individuals; the sexual revolution of the sixties; the so-called new morality; the alternative press; alternative music; the so-called counter-culture movement; the legalised practice of abortion and euthanasia; the growing influence of feminist movements in advancing gender equality in both private and public matters; the challenging of the doctrine of *ex Cathedra* Catholicism, and the legalising of new formats of homosocial relations such as civil unions are some examples of the post-war thinking that question the wisdom of old and entrenched privileges and practices that signify the diminishing authority and rationale of the old moral order (see Faure 2006: 31).

The above developments contributed to the role of political theory as practised in the first half of the twentieth century, falling into disrepute and losing much of its presumed theoretical and

moral authority. It was generally agreed that such a role was the exegesis and dissemination of ideas of the canon of ‘great thinkers’ of the past, and to apply the practical wisdom of such ideas to the issues of practical politics encountered on a daily basis. By the late 1950s, the behavioural revolution in political science increasingly supplanted the search for prudence and practical wisdom in political theory, with a search for value-neutral propositions and hypotheses, preferably in mathematical format that were, in principle, susceptible to empirical testing. To the extent that theory played a role in this form of scientific inquiry into political behaviour, it was strictly data-driven and modelled on the natural sciences, ultimately seeking the development of a science that resembled something like theoretical physics rather than prudence and the wisdom of individual political judgement and action (see Frazer 2010: 1). Against the background of this development, Leo Strauss (1957: 346), in his influential article *What is political philosophy?*, famously wrote that

[o]riginally political philosophy was identical with political science, and it was the all-embracing study of human affairs. Today, we find it cut into pieces which behave as if they were parts of a worm. In the first place, one has applied the distinction between philosophy and science to the study of human affairs, and accordingly one makes a distinction between a non-philosophical political science and a non-scientific political philosophy, a distinction which under present conditions takes away all dignity, all honesty from political philosophy.

3.1 Orientations and foci in political philosophy/ theory

During the 1950s and 1960s, behaviouralism as the mainstream of political science in America precipitated and galvanised its dominance over the traditional notion of political theory. In this period, some work produced in the latter field was perceived as being hostile to the American notion of democracy. Gunnell, (2004: 49) notes that “an attack on liberal pluralism, and the science of politics which was grounded upon it, was mounted within political science itself by the new generation of émigré political theorists such as Leo Strauss and their progeny, as well as by certain indigenous thinkers, such as Theodore Lowi (1969), who still subscribed to the remnants of the Progressive vision”. Although behaviouralism was characterised by

innovation and methodological refinement during this period, it was primarily inspired by, and predicated on, a defence of the normal science of politics and pluralist democracy which it sought to validate (Gunnell 2004: 49). By the late 1960s, behaviouralism became the target of critics who accused it of depoliticising political science owing to its undue obsession with scientific methodology and quantification, in particular. This resulted in the formation of *The caucus for a new political science* within the *American Political Science Association* (APSA) that sought to make political science more “explicitly political, more attentive to contemporary political and policy problems, and less focused on science and method” (Garand 2005: 981-2). David Easton’s (1969) call for a post-behavioural revolution in American political science, to some extent, acknowledged that there was a dichotomy in political science separated by a fundamental disagreement on the manner in which political reality should be understood.

In the most general sense, this disagreement was not only on the intellectual manner in which politics should be inquired into, but significantly also on the substantive focus of what should be studied, given the interrelationship between these aspects. From the 1970s onwards, the so-called nomothetic-idiographic divide between mainstream political science and political philosophy/theory (also referred to as the explanation-interpretation dichotomy) became more pronounced as a criterion or approach that distinguished the way in which two academic communities pursued their respective intellectual inquiries into political reality. It significantly also marked a period in which political philosophy/theory reframed its various identities more deliberately, and more explicitly. We shall briefly explore some aspects of the British experience as a corollary of these trends in America. In this, we rely on the work of Frazer (2010). His essay vividly distinguishes different intellectual orientations in political theory and, in particular, the outlines of that orientation that is most supportive of the *phronesis* revival movement.

Frazer’s (2010) understanding of political philosophy/theory during this period and subsequent decades is based on a threefold taxonomy that differentiates its various formats according to the way in which theory orients itself to the canon of great thinkers of the past. The taxonomy that he uses is to distinguish between theory that is historicist, ahistoricist and transhistoricist in nature. Each of

these types of theory reveal a great deal to us about not only how we understand the value of past ideas, but also how we view the intellectual quest to which we commit ourselves in the first instance. For Frazer, the reframing of traditional political theory in Britain initially resulted in a bifurcated situation in which the traditional subfield of political theory more clearly divided itself into the history of political thought, on the one hand, and contemporary political philosophy, on the other. For Fraser, this duality represents the orientations of historicist and ahistoricist political theory, respectively. The goal of the former (frequently associated with the University of Cambridge) is to study and understand the ideas of past thinkers in terms of their unique historical contexts and there is no attempt to argue their relevance or application to contemporary contexts, while the latter (mostly associated with the University of Oxford) is, to a great extent, ahistorical in its orientation. To this end, Frazer (2010: 2) notes that

[i]ntellectual historians have put forward a large methodological literature defending this model of a divided discipline - much of it by the so-called 'Cambridge School' of historical contextualists such as Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock. Interestingly, there is no methodological literature of a similar scope and richness being put forward by those on the other side of the bifurcated model of political theory; Oxfordians have apparently seen less need to defend their ahistoricism than Cantabridgians have seen to defend their historicism".

Frazer argues that, in general, the historicist variety of political theory is not interested in seeking normative guidance from the canonical thinkers of the past; its primary interest is to study and understand the meaning of such texts in terms of their own contexts as closely and accurately as the original author's own understanding of the ideas themselves. He states that such an aim is pursued for its own sake and not as an intermediary step towards prescriptive motives for contemporary matters. "An author's intentions when writing a particular text - however canonical - are of interest simply as one historical datum in a universe of other data" (Frazer 2010: 4). The value of such writing is premised on its truth and not on its contemporary usefulness. In this view, an historical fact that seems useful to us is most probably an anachronism, and if the fact happens to pertain to a perennial matter, the very fact that it is so makes it unhistorical (Frazer 2010: 4, Pocock 2009: 77). As should be evident, the historicist variety

of political theory cannot, as a matter of principle, be supportive of the *phronesis* revival in seeking practical wisdom from the long dead, since its criticism of the tradition of ideas is history, and after such criticism is complete, the past tradition can no longer provide us with practical wisdom (Frazer 2010: 5, Pocock 2009: 205). “As Skinner famously put it ‘we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves’” (Frazer 2010: 5, Skinner 1988: 267, 66).

For Frazer, the ahistoricist variety of contemporary political philosophy associated with Oxford scholarship is similarly not conducive to the search for historical examples of practical wisdom that could potentially be of value for present political situations. He finds this rather surprising, for philosophers generally concern themselves with abstract issues such as concepts and categories which, to some extent, render them to be timeless. He writes that one would expect that past philosophers have at least something valuable to tell us about abstract political issues, even though we may not accept Leo Strauss’ conviction that the eternal essence of political issues has been revealed to us a long time ago (Frazer 2010: 5-6). According to Frazer (2010: 5), the reluctance or refusal of ahistoricist political theory to engage with past thinkers in this manner can be ascribed to at least two considerations. The first is the disposition or conviction among ahistoricist theorists to “behave as if nothing philosophically valuable was written more than about forty years ago, exhibiting what Hans-Johann Glock calls ‘historiophoba’”, (see Glock 2008: 867-97). What underlies this is the belief that questions and issues of half a century ago are simply not similar to those encountered at present, and that the answers to such matters, even though it may be similar in the abstract, simply do not apply to different cultural and historical contexts. The second consideration that explains this orientation of ahistoricist theorists is a conviction that present-day answers to political issues and problems are simply superior to those of their predecessors, and related to this, the belief that philosophy is a progressive and cumulative enterprise (Frazer 2010: 6).

On the progressive and cumulative nature of this type of analytic philosophy, McDermott (2008: 11), for example, argues that while there is probably not a comparable development in the progress of philosophy as in the history of science, he nevertheless states “but I do believe (perhaps naively) that there has been significant progress”,

while Rorty (1984: 4) similarly states that “we should treat the history of philosophy as we treat the history of science. In the latter field, we have no reluctance in saying that we know better than our ancestors what they were talking about” (Frazer 2010: 6). Frazer finds the disposition of this variety of political theory to ignore or “correct” the thoughts of their illustrious intellectual predecessors to be remarkably hubristic. It, in fact, suggests that the average philosophy professor in our time has greater knowledge about the abstract perennial truths than did the greatest authors and thinkers of the past. In extreme format, such a disposition makes the greatest philosophers of the past, as Hacking writes, “pen-pals across the seas of time, whose words are to be read like the work of brilliant but underprivileged children in a refugee camp, deeply instructive but in need of firm correction” (Frazer 2010: 8, 7, Hacking 1984: 103). For Frazer, Rorty explains this as our underlying need to have conversations with the mighty dead, and to demonstrate that there has been a rational progress in our civilization’s recorded history and that we differ with them on grounds which they can be led to accept. “The result is a ‘conversation with the re-educated dead’”, the kind of conversation “one has with somebody who is brilliantly and originally right about something dear to one’s heart, but who exasperatingly mixes up this topic with a lot of outdated foolishness” (Frazer 2010: 7, Rorty 1984: 51-2). Frazer warns that the re-education, the “rational reconstruction” of past thinkers in this way leaves them as unrecognisable persons, victims that have been inducted in our disciplinary matrices. He writes that honesty in this respect consists of “keeping in mind the possibility that our self-justifying conversation is with creatures of our own fantasy rather than with historical personages, even ideally re-educated historical personages” (Frazer 2010: 7, Rorty 1984: 71).

Compared to historical and ahistorical political theory, transhistoricist political theory is an orientation that defends the theory of a practice against the practice of theory. The former is the willingness to learn from insights about, and instances of, practical wisdom in the past, while the latter’s goal, as outlined earlier, precludes such a willingness to learn and derive practical wisdom from the canon of past thinkers. Transhistoricist theorists thus distance themselves from historicist theory’s interest in antiquarian history and textual meaning only, and ahistoricist theory’s interest

in the anachronistic and rational reconstruction of past ideas on the basis of presumed superior contemporary insights. Both these varieties of political theory insulate us from the past and, in doing so, help to, as MacIntyre (1984:34) puts it, “reinforce the prejudices of the present” that “would most disquiet us” (Frazer 2010: 13, 12). Frazer equates such a philosophical nullifying of the past with a nullifying of the present as well as ourselves in advance. Our own ephemeral occupation of the present will soon transmute into the philosophical past itself. It thus begs the question as to why we study the past in the first instance if the truths we discover about it are restricted to the past, or why we impose truths from the present on the past if the past is past (Frazer 2010: 12, MacIntyre 1984: 39-40).

Transhistorical political theory's orientation is, therefore, conducive and supportive of scholars who argue in favour of the merits and value of the practical political value of Aristotelian *phronesis*. For Frazer, its goal is, unlike that of philosophy, the acquisition of practical wisdom, whereas that of political philosophy is dedicated to the acquisition of abstract political truths. Contemporary relevance of knowledge is seemingly not a prerequisite for philosophy; however, political theory (and Aristotelian political science) is inescapably predicated on such a requirement. While this does not necessarily imply that past thinkers hold the key to practical wisdom, transhistoricist political theorists often turn to the canon of thinkers for normative guidance. They do this not primarily for the content of abstract truths that it may contain, but rather for the reclamation of practical wisdom that may possibly be relevant for present times (Frazer 2010: 9). The distinction between abstract truth and practical wisdom is the Aristotelian distinction alluded to earlier, namely the distinction between *sophia* and *phronesis*. Whereas the philosopher is a lover of wisdom, the *phronesis* of the *Phronimos* can be described as “philophronetic”²⁰ (which, by Frazer's [2010: 9] own admission, is a hideous neologism). Unlike *phronesis*, *sophia* is not bound to context nor to *phronesis*. However, as pointed out earlier, the latter occasionally requires the insight and the guidance of the former. *Phronesis* or practical wisdom is thus the ability to act within a context on the basis of utilising a synthesised knowledge and understanding derived from habituated experience in the moral

20 A form of *phronesis* that seeks the advice of philosophy from time to time.

virtues, as well as the ability to infer from abstract philosophical truths the ability to translate these into ways of acting that optimally serves the human good (Frazer 2010: 9).

3.2 The post-war interest in *phronesis* and phronetic politics

As mentioned by way of introduction to this article, evidence of the revival of interest in Aristotelian *phronesis* and its associated moral virtues can be found in the recent histories of many fields of inquiry. We restrict ourselves, in this instance, to only a few observations on the recent history of philosophy and, more specifically, political philosophy (often referred to as political theory) and the discipline of political science with regard to the interest in Aristotelian *phronesis*²¹. We can only briefly mention some examples of post-war transhistorical theory, some aspects of its ongoing revival in the late twentieth century and, most recently, calls for the need to revive a focus on phronetic politics in political theory. In doing so, we will primarily borrow from the American experience, given its global (though not uncontested) influence on such scholarship.

Evidence of the *phronesis* revival in the mode of transhistorical political and moral theory, as outlined earlier, became more pronounced following the Second World War. Some of the earliest examples of such scholarship in the 1950s are those of Anscombe (1958) and Arendt (1958) who both use *The NE* and its implied *phronesis* to argue for a non-legal morality based on Aristotle's virtues, and an extended notion of Aristotle's virtue of friendship to reconstitute the public realm of political life, respectively. In the 1960s, Wolin's (1969) thoughts on political theory as a separate autonomous vocation remain one of the best-known defences of a transhistoricist understanding of politics of that time. It may be stated that such transhistorical political theory found some form of autonomy and legitimation after the formation of the *Caucus* and the acknowledgement of a post-behavioural era in political science from the 1970s onwards. It has been suggested that the alienation between political science and

21 The histories of these fields have been well documented by scholars and for American political theory it covers at least the period of the last century (see Gunnell 1981, 1996, 2004, 2006, Dryzek 2006).

political theory during this period was due to the fact that political science lost its reflective dimension, and that political theory lost its contact with politics by embracing a variety of external intellectual domains (Gunnell 2006: 22).

To the extent that transhistorical political theory focuses on *phronesis*, the decades following this juncture are marked by a wide range of publications that espouse the virtues of Aristotle's *phronesis* in many ways, of which his notion of political friendship (*philia politike*) is probably the dominant, though not the only theme. This friendship scholarship is also characterised by hermeneutic overtones in seeking new meaning in Aristotle's texts, as well as extending and adapting ancient meaning in the light of postmodern changes in considering the role of women in politics, the features of the modern nation state, the role of *phronesis* in the paralogy that characterises the postmodern knowledge condition, and so on.²² In this transhistorical scholarship, the role of *phronesis* in individual political judgement is the fundamental issue that underlies the attempts to reclaim the prudence inherent in Aristotle's ethics.

While the post-war decades experienced a remarkable revival of interest in *phronesis* and phronetic politics, the empirical and scientific study of politics and, in particular, the influence of rational choice theory and its commitment to, and defence of, pluralist democracy, remained the dominant theoretical orientation in the discipline. The revival movement seemed to have culminated, at least symbolically, with the anonymous Mr *Perestroika* letter that raised the urgent need for an implied *phronesis* revival and phronetic politics in institutionalised American political science when it first circulated over the internet in October 2000 (Schram 2003: 836). The period immediately prior to, and following the so-called *perestroika* revolt is marked by an intensive examination of the issues raised in the *perestroika* challenge. Two lengthy review essays of books that address these matters portray these

22 With regard to the search for new meaning, see Van der Valk 2004-2005 and Derrida's 1988, 1979 deconstruction of the concept of *philia*. With regard to the extension and adaptation of ancient meaning to suit the features of the modern state and the changing role of women in politics, see Schwarzenbach 1996, 2009, Ward 2008 and Schwaetzer 2006. With regard to the role of *phronesis* in postmodern hermeneutics and the postmodern knowledge condition, see Gallagher n.d.

issues, namely Thiele's (2000) six-book review entitled *Common sense, judgment and the limits of political theory* and Schram's (2003) seven-book review entitled *Return to politics: perestroika and post paradigmatic political science*. The former appraises various works that claim that the cultivation of common sense and good judgement should determine the mandate of political theory, and that this can bypass the pitfalls of foundationalism and relativism. In doing so, it could expand the scope of human freedom and thereby escape the negative effects of nihilism (Thiele 2000: 565-6). The latter appraises various works against the background of *perestroika* claims that political theory should be more interpretative and case sensitive and less statistical than the decontextualised hypotheses that the scientific notion of political theory defends (see Schram 2003: 836-8, 49-50). While the general aims and thrust of the *perestroika* movement were supportive of *phronesis* research into phronetic politics, its rise and demise accomplished little more than an acceptance of diversity in the use of methods and, in particular, qualitative methods, resembling earlier periods of theoretical dissidence in the discipline.

4. *Phronesis* and the theory-practice divide: a bridge too far?

Our exploration of *phronesis* in this article has been guided by the question as to whether the *Phronimos* can indeed figuratively re-enact the role of actualising prudent political action in our own time, as originally conceived by Aristotle. To this end, we have analysed the nature of *phronesis* and its constituent cognitive elements, its complex relation to Aristotle's moral virtues, and its occasional dependence on the insights of philosophy; an initiative that should not be initiated by the philosopher, but by prudent and morally serious statesmen. The latter also presented itself to us as the relationship between philosophy and politics, and how both of these respectively relate to Aristotle's moral virtues. Our earlier examination suggests that the former has cognitive authority over the latter and that such authority is independent of politics itself, whereas the use of *phronesis* in politics is partially and occasionally dependent on the guidance of philosophy. The possibility of such a form of phronetic politics in which the *Phronimos* is figuratively reincarnated in our time is a goal

to which modern political philosophy/theory has committed itself as an intellectual challenge with presumed practical significance. In a sense, this intermittent reliance of statesmen on philosophy and the practical import of political science were most probably an ideal that Aristotle cherished in teaching the students of his *Lyceum* over two millennia ago. In this respect, we have briefly outlined features of transhistoricism, the theoretical orientation most suited for the pursuit of this goal, as one of the many theoretical orientations in the discipline of political science. With *phronesis* and the ability to act prudently as the central issue of concern of such an undertaking, it is now incumbent on us to answer the crucial question as to whether this theoretical orientation and its recent revival can bridge the theory-practice divide. Stated differently, can the intellectual discourse between political philosophy/theory and that of public political discourse in any way influence the practice of politics to be in conformity with the presumed prudence of *phronesis*, or is it a bridge too far for both the *Phronimos* and political theory to cross?

Transhistorical political theory that argues for the recovery of *phronesis* is a theory of a practice. The nature and practice of *phronesis* is the study object of such a theory. It entails not only the nature of *phronesis* itself, but also historical instances of its use as well as the desirability of utilising and fostering its presumed moral virtues in contemporary political behaviour and actions. The notion of *phronesis* as well as real-world instances of phronetic politics imply a practical or practice-bound attempt by the *Phronimos* to resolve his “theoretical” understanding of *phronesis* at the moment of judgement or action itself. The cognitive sources of *phronesis* that inform and guide the morally serious and prudent statesman must combine with the unique practical and moral requirements of the context of action and actualise a virtuous outcome. It is an attempt to practically resolve the theory-practice problem inherent to the practice of *phronesis*. Such attempts at bridging the theory-practice divide inherent to phronetic politics itself are not to be confused with the theory-practice divide that characterises the relation between transhistorical political theory and its object of inquiry which is the former, namely *phronesis* and the practice of phronetic politics. This distinction is not a matter of analytic nit-picking, since it distinguishes two theory-practice divides that must be bridged if the *phronesis* revival is to have any practical

significance. These theory-practice divides are interrelated: they both share the goal of fostering *phronesis*, but the challenges they face in actualising it differ. We shall now address these by first exploring the divide, the bridge which the *Phronimos* must cross.

4.1 The theory-practice divide that the *Phronimos* must cross

In this instance, we artificially and provisionally omit the presumed connection of political philosophy/theory with phronetic politics in order to focus on considerations that must be entertained when the *Phronimos* attempts to practically resolve a theory-practice divide. We shall subsequently return to the former. Phronetic politics that attempts to invoke the moral authority of Aristotelian *phronesis* must demonstrate the ability to act in conformity with cognitive sources that such a disposition requires and, in doing so, practically cross its own theory-practice divide. Faced with the need for judgement, decision and action, the latter-day Aristotelian *Phronimos*, habituated in the moral virtues and experienced in learning from experience over time, must optimally combine and translate his understanding of appropriate insights gained from *techné*, *epistémé* and philosophy into virtuous action. We may entertain the consideration that it is certainly not unrealistic to assume that modern democratic communities could harbour many persons who possess these requirements for acting in a practical manner. Such requirements and personal attributes may have been acquired by way of various forms of education, also in moral virtues, and the fact that the political system contains features that make it derivatively and analogously philosophical in nature, which is conducive to prudent behaviour. In the absence of such virtuous persons directly consulting philosophy or philosophers with regard to their prudent behaviour, the question arises as to whether, in the strict Aristotelian sense, we may speak of phronetic, or stricter still, philophronetic politics. We may even go one step further and postulate that, while examples of persons who act in prudent ways are found in most if not all societies, many such persons may never have heard of *phronesis* and its associated moral virtues. Such instances must certainly imply that persons known for such prudent behaviour have, in some way, cognitively mastered an understanding, of the causal and moral requirements for such behaviour. May we,

in the Aristotelian sense, speak of a practical bridging of the theory-practice divide in either of these examples, given the absence of a philosophical "consultation" in the first example, and the ignorance about *phronesis* and its philosophical connection in the second? Should the consequences of such instances of prudent judgement not also form part of answering these questions? This issue requires further elaboration.

It appears that the Aristotelian relation between *sophia* and *phronesis*, philosophy and politics, the abstract and the concrete, lies at the heart of this matter. It prompts the question as to whether, in our time, it is realistic to assume that statesmen, politicians, in whatever position, will necessarily consult philosophy or philosophers in order to heighten or improve the prudence of their judgements and the ensuing actions. This is highly unlikely. In Plato's teaching, this linkage between philosophy and politics would not be a problem, since the Philosopher King would possess such knowledge, but Aristotle's teaching created a precarious linkage between these categories. Despite his fundamental disagreements with Plato, Aristotle's conviction that the political life and the philosophical life of contemplation should be separated as well as linked in a particular manner seems to be not only a problem for his time, but simultaneously one that resonates for the possibility of phronetic politics and the practical relevance of transhistorical political theory in postmodern times. Gunnell (2009: 14) writes that Aristotle

struggled with the issue of exactly how knowing *about* and knowing *how* could be reconciled, and although he conceived of political science as a practical science, defined by having 'an end in action,' *Phronesis* was prudence or practical wisdom as opposed to abstract or contemplative knowledge which was the province of philosophy or *Sophia*. It was hardly clear in Aristotle's context how philosophy, political science, and politics were, or could be, related, and it is certainly no clearer today. To argue that social science should be more 'phronetic' is really to suggest, maybe quite contrary to Aristotle's position, that a metapractice should in some fundamental manner displace or override practical judgment.

Aristotle's apparent conviction that morally serious men would be imbued with virtue by the need for occasional contact with philosophers and philosophy may possibly be accounted for by the nature and size of the ancient Athenian *polis*. Given the small size

of ancient Greek political communities, his expectation about this is probably not unrealistic, since philosophers may have acted as influential public intellectuals in conditions and a manner quite unlike philosophers and political theorists in larger postmodern states of the twenty-first century. It appears that the practical resolution of the theory-practice divide of a strict interpretation of Aristotle's phronetic politics in our time is nearly unattainable, as viewed from the vantage point of the *Phronimos*.

4.2 The theory-practice divide that political philosophy/theory purports to bridge

Moving to the second theory-practice divide, we briefly examine the relation between the intellectual discourse of political philosophy/theory and its object of study, philophronetic politics, and how the former faces up to its own goal of actualising its object of study in contemporary politics. It is, in a sense, the mirror-image of the problem faced by the *Phronimos*, not crossing the theory-practice divide in moving from politics to philosophy, but moving from philosophy to politics. The genesis of the matter is similar to that which influences obstacles facing the *Phronimos* and his Aristotelian dependence on *sophia*, but different in nature.

This second theory-practice divide has long haunted political philosophy/theory (in fact, all the theoretical orientations in political science) since its modern self-identification with the merits and defence of the democratic politics of the societies in which it is practised as an academic profession. Historiographers and political theorists who have traced the history of these intellectual enterprises for over a century have pointed out that successive so-called revolutions and rebellions, about which methodological orientations and theoretical foci would best serve the practice of science, have failed to face the theory-practice problem head-on. While the commitment to the practical significance of theorising about politics was not in question, the successive debates about this primarily concerned the questions of which model of science, philosophy or theory and their associated methods would best serve this purpose. The so-called behavioural and post-behavioural revolutions, the *Caucus* as well as the *perestroika* movement, all of which we have referred to in passing, are cases in

point. The practical relevance of intellectual discourse was a key issue in these successive introspections, but the matter remains unsatisfactory, and especially whether or not alternative models of intellectual inquiry and their associated methods can resolve the problem of practical significance at all.

The inability of political philosophy/theory to realise the goal of practical significance may be ascribed to a number of factors. The first pertains to the very nature of politics as the study object of political philosophy/theory. Unlike the study objects of natural science, it is encountered in a format which already contains countless meanings that result from the activity of politics itself; political actors impose meanings and appraisals to events, which are endlessly preceded by similar conceptualisations of political life. It renders politics to be, among others, a hermeneutic activity. The intellectual study of politics introduces a second level of hermeneutics, in that pre-existing conceptualisations of politics are, in turn, conceptualised by the intellectual discourse that studies this, the latter being hermeneutic itself. This feature is what Giddens (1976) calls the double hermeneutic. At the moment of first encounter, political theory unavoidably experiences its study objects with a measure of distance from the nature of the study objects themselves, since the double hermeneutic cannot avoid or bypass this.

Study objects are not encountered in such manner in natural science's study of the inanimate objects of the physical world by either the theoretical practitioners of such science or the practitioners that manipulate the elements of the physical world that will benefit natural science itself, or man's purposes for such manipulation and application. Political theory's turning to this model of natural science during the so-called behavioural revolution of the 1950s may have been inspired by the expectation that such a theoretical orientation would bypass the confusing and alienating effects of the double hermeneutic and afford a greater measure of practical relevance to such theory. The inability to achieve this may be explained by the fact that such theory found its model for such science not in the nature of politics as its study object, but in philosophy of science's metareconstruction of such science, namely logical positivism. Paradoxically, the absence or avoidance of interpretative methods in this view of science, as experienced as the double hermeneutic

in more interpretative theoretical orientations, led to criticism that behavioural science depoliticised politics itself and further alienated such theory from its object of inquiry and the possibility of ensuring practical significance.

The ontology of politics is such that one cannot bypass an interpretation of its features. Gunnell eloquently pointed out that each act of interpretation by metapractices, such as various forms of political theory, reconstitutes its subject matter, and that the latter is, to some extent, hostage to an infinite variation in meaning despite its “conceptually and existentially pre-formed character” (Gunnell 2009: 14). While claims intrinsic to a certain class of study objects, such as politics, unavoidably create the nature of such subject matter, the claims of metapractices such as different forms of political theory are representations of this. In the context of the practical significance of such representations for its study objects, these representations “come up abruptly, both cognitively and practically, against the conceptual structure and content of the practices about which they speak” (Gunnell 2009: 14). The cognitive and practical aspects referred to, in this instance, pertain to the implications of the epistemic levelling of the truth values of social science and political theory and those of everyday social and political practices. Philosophy, social science and political theory have not easily digested the incommensurability of truth claims that obtain between different orders of discourse such as philosophy of science, political theory and its study objects, a situation explained in part by “an anxiety about the cognitive superiority of metapractices and their claim to adduce standards of judgment that transcended those of their object of inquiry” (Gunnell 2009: 1, 14, 1998: chapters 3 and 4). This lies at the heart of the implied objective of political philosophy/theory to bridge the theory-practice divide in terms of *phronesis* and phronetic politics.

As the political theorist who has probably done the most extensive work on problems pertaining to the practical purchase of political theory in contemporary times, it is warranted that we further follow Gunnell. He draws attention to scholars who have stressed the intrinsic autonomy and non-transferability of truth claims between various orders of discourse which include Weber (1904), Oakeshott (1975), Winch (1964), Kuhn (1962) and Wittgenstein (1969). In this instance, we briefly highlight Gunnell’s reading of these scholars

(see Gunnell 2009: 6, 9, 10, 12). The first is Weber's recognition of the ultimate autonomy of politics, and simultaneously, his message to politicians that science was the province of scientists which possessed its own criteria of judgement. In turn, Oakeshott was of the opinion that theorists could claim a cognitively superior platform of understanding human conduct, but not a superiority with regard to practices that were studied. It would be inappropriate to cross the boundary that separated the theory and practice of human conduct. Similarly, Winch insisted that there were no general criteria that could resolve conflicts about the ontologies and epistemologies that separated intellectual inquiry and its study objects and that this was similarly the case for deciding on alternative accounts of social science found in philosophy of science. Winch's understanding is echoed by Kuhn's belief that the facticity of alternative scientific accounts of study objects or paradigms is incommensurable with one another, given the absence of extra-paradigmatic criteria to resolve such differences. Gunnell (2009: 12) writes that

[c]ertainly Winch, and arguably Kuhn, were influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks 'on certainty' where he claimed that criteria of 'truth' belong to our 'frame of reference' and that conflicts between frameworks, whether within a practice or between a metapractice and its object of inquiry, can only be settled by 'persuasion'" (see Wittgenstein 1969: 83, 262).

From our brief exploration of the relation between intellectual discourse and its subject matter, we may infer that there is no justification for an epistemic levelling of the claims that emanate from both of these practices. In a democratic sense, the autonomy of these spheres is assumed in principle, and their respective claims are particular to their respective frames of reference. However, experience teaches that indirect reciprocal influencing of these respective orders of discourse and activity does occur, despite the cognitive impediments traced earlier. This implies that neither of these domains can claim epistemic privilege over that of the other. Political philosophy/theory's arguments for the desirability of phronetic politics in our time must contend with both a cognitive and a practical frame of reference, which harbours norms of authority and truth claims intrinsic to the domain of politics that is quite distinct from those of the intellectual activity of theorising. Aristotle's *NE* affords philosophy, cognitive authority

over politics. While this is implied in the contemporary revival of interest in *phronesis*, his treatises simultaneously also acknowledged the tension between truth and power in the *polis*, a tension equally prevalent in postmodern politics. What Aristotle bequeathed to his successors is, therefore, the paradox that the independence of philosophy does not require enlightenment from the *polis*, but the latter, according to Aristotle's philosophy, requires it from the former from time to time.

Given the fact that cognitive authority of philosophy over politics cannot be directly claimed by way of epistemic privilege, the matter suggests that philosophy will have to indirectly enter and influence the realm of politics and infuse into the latter philosophical elements conducive to *phronesis*. The present challenge of transhistorical political theory is to make philosophy more relevant in a political sense and politics more philosophically aware in another sense. This bypassing of the conventional theory-practice divide will have to rely on education, participation in public and political discourse, the media in all its modern formats and all other avenues that afford philosophy persuasion in realising the common good that is too often sorely neglected in the postmodern character of democratic politics. In this way, the metapractical voice of the *Phronimos* may be heard in the conventional world of politics.

5. Conclusion

Our exploration of the contemporary revival of Aristotelian *phronesis* attended to the nature of this intellectual virtue, its relation to the moral virtues as well as the role that philosophy occupies in Aristotle's understanding of political science and the nature of politics. We subsequently moved to contemporary times and outlined some of the practical and theoretical factors that account for efforts to reincarnate the *Phronimos* in our time. We identified transhistoricist political philosophy/theory which, unlike other forms of theorising, explicitly sets itself the goal to recover from the past an understanding of *phronesis* and instances of practical wisdom that could potentially be of use in contemporary times. In closing, we explored some of the cognitive, political and practical obstacles that must be bypassed if political philosophy/theory is to realise such a goal.

Modern democratic states and, in particular, newly democratised ones such as South Africa rely heavily on democratic procedures, constitutional prescriptions, and universalised legal maxims in various forms of legislation to ensure that the notion of the common good is cared for by the various organs of the state. The presupposition of such a legal form of morality is that the common good will be protected and cared for as long as the rules are adhered to and the legal limitations of political behaviour are not transgressed. However, a presumed prudence in politics that relies on these safeguards only cannot prevent injustice, corruption, authoritarianism, the gross accumulation of wealth, influence, power and the insatiable quest for honour by politicians, since they acquire these despite the formal procedural and legal safeguards mentioned earlier. To the extent that such an overgrasping of political goods by some, and the injustice resulting from this for others does not represent the best life for all, Aristotle's teaching on *phronesis* is a stark reminder that a full and fair appraisal of this problem is necessarily bound up with an examination of personal virtue, philosophy, justice and wisdom.

Phronesis can mediate between the technical and clinical rationality of postmodern thinking and the excessive and wilful self-assertion that is possible in communities that predominantly rely on procedural and legal prescripts to counter the personal deficiencies and excesses that invariably take root in the absence of a personal and civic virtue that can supplement rules and laws of righteous political behaviour. A latter-day *Phronimos*, habituated in *phronesis* and the human excellences and the dangers of excess and deficiency in all of them, will act and "remind fellow citizens of what they can know to be just by nature if only they can overcome the influence of pleasure, pain, narrow self-interest, unrestrained imagination, excessive hope or fear"; realising this among citizens is the goal of transhistorical political philosophy/theory (see Ruderman 1997: 418).

Liberal democratic states must contend with the dilemma, the paradox, that they cannot retain their liberal nature with or without an account of moral virtue. A plural political community that subscribes to an account of moral virtue based on naturalistic bonds such as family, ethnicity, race, nation, the Volk, religion, or a shared origin of humanity is bound to seriously endanger its own liberal character. By contrast, a fostering of *phronesis* and its associated personal virtues

in civic education and matters of political judgement will, because of its individualistic nature, not pose the same dangers. The intellectual and practical challenge of embedding the virtues of *phronesis* into the political community may, at any point in time, seem to be a bridge too far for both the theoretical man and the political community to cross. This may prove to be in the nature of the coexistence of philosophy and politics itself, but it does not detract from the ideal of virtue and the good represented by the *Phronimos*.

There is no doubt that it will remain a passion for Aristotelian philosophy to pursue this ideal.

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