Smoothing It: Some Aristotelian misgivings about the phronesis-praxis perspective on education

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Abstract

A kind of ‘neo-Aristotelianism’ that connects educational reasoning and reflection to phronesis, and education itself to praxis, has gained considerable following in recent educational discourse. The author identifies four cardinal claims of this phronesis-praxis perspective: that a) Aristotle’s epistemology and methodology imply a stance that is essentially, with regard to practical philosophy, anti-method and anti-theory; b) ‘producing’, under the rubric of techné, as opposed to ‘acting’ under the rubric of phronesis, is an unproblematically codifiable process; c) phronesis must be given a particularist interpretation; and d) teaching is best understood as praxis in the Aristotelian sense, guided by phronesis. The author argues that these claims have insufficient grounding in Aristotle’s own writings, and that none of them stands up to scrutiny.

Keywords: Aristotle, phronesis, teaching as praxis, moral particularism, anti-theory

1. Introduction: What is the PPP?

During the last quarter of a century or so, Aristotelianism has been undergoing a revival in educational circles. What has come to the fore, however, is not a single all-embracing perspective of ‘neo-Aristotelianism’ but rather at least three distinguishable sub-perspectives. After introducing briefly these sub-perspectives, my aim in the present essay is to explore in detail, and subsequently to challenge, the last of the three: the recently fashionable phronesis-praxis perspective on education.

The first of the three sub-perspectives could be termed the ethos-perspective. A concomitant of moral and political communitarianism, this perspective highlights the importance of the ethos—the customs of the tradition-embedded community—including, inter alia, the ethos of the school. While allegedly carved out of a lore found in Aristotle’s writing, especially his Politics, the views trotted out under the banner of this particular form of neo-Aristotelianism have been heavily influenced by Gadamer’s endorsement of tradition-sanctioned ‘prejudices’ and even Hegel’s radical reification of the communal spirit. In Germany, where the ethos-perspective seems to have gained most prominence, it has, with good reason, been criticised—by Habermasians and others—for being neo-Hegelian, rather than neo-Aristotelian, as well as for its conservative and elitist tendencies (see, e.g., Schnädelbach,
1987/1988). Conspicuously missing from the ethos-perspective, it is commonly lamented, are Aristotle’s important notions of logos (rational discourse) and telos (rational end).

Appreciably different from the ethos-perspective is what I would call the logos-perspective. Harking back to Green’s (1976) presidential address to the Philosophy of Education Society, this perspective utilises Aristotle’s account of practical syllogisms to explain (and hopefully improve) teacher and student reasoning processes: to aid them in their thinking and rational discourse about educational means and ends. The logos-perspective was elucidated in some detail in a number of articles in journals such as Educational Theory and Journal of Curriculum Studies in the 1980s and 90s, but has since gradually faded in importance or been absorbed into the currently mainstream perspective of phronesis-praxis, the form of educational neo-Aristotelianism that will be my sole concern in the present essay.

The phronesis-praxis perspective (hereafter, for brevity’s sake, referred to as ‘the PPP”) is more difficult to summarise clearly than the other two. Nevertheless, its popularity, especially in the U.K. and Scandinavia, is pellucidly clear; one could almost talk there of an all-you-can eat phronesis-praxis buffet currently underway in educational circles, with reverberations reaching out to other work-related subjects such as medicine and nursing. I will, in the following, rely primarily on the writings of two important advocates of the PPP: Joseph Dunne, with his sweeping and penetrating study of Aristotle and his modern successors (1993; see also 1999), and Wilfred Carr, who has produced substantive arguments for the PPP in a number of writings and attempted to fashion a ‘practical’ educational philosophy along its lines (1995; 2004; see also Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

The cardinal motivation behind the PPP seems to be to try to resolve one of the most intractable historical problems of education, the uneasy relationship between educational theory and practice, by reconfiguring—eliminating or transcending—the very dichotomy underlying it, through retrieval of certain Aristotelian insights. To outline these insights as briefly as possible, they concern the now all-too-familiar distinctions commonly ascribed to Aristotle between three main forms of reasoning or intellectual pursuits (dianoia) and their respective bases and activities. (I say ‘commonly ascribed’, because the actual distinctions drawn by Aristotle in 1985, pp. 148–7 [1139a–1141a] between the different states or conditions [hexeis] of the soul in which it grasps the truth seem somewhat more complex.) These three main forms are theoria (knowing) which is based on episteme (true knowledge as opposed to mere opinion); nous (understanding) or sophia (pure contemplative wisdom); techné (technical thinking) which is based on eidos (the idea of a plan or design) and issues in poiesis (making, production); and finally phronesis (prudence) which is based on the idea of eudaimonia (the specifically human good) and issues in praxis (action, practice). While the ‘good or bad state’ of theoria consists simply in ‘being true or false’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 150 [1139a]), the good or bad states of techné are worthy and worthless products, and those of phronesis wise and unwise actions.

The crucial move of the PPP is, then, to link educational reasoning and reflection to phronesis, and education itself to praxis. Education is not a theoretical activity (Carr, 1995, p. 33), but a practical one: practical not in the sense of poiesis, which
is ‘guided by fixed ends and governed by determinate rules’ (ibid., p. 73), but rather in the sense of praxis which is more comprehensive and open-ended. Yet the old theory-practice dichotomy is transcended, as there is still room for theory of a sort—although neither of the theoria nor techné kind, as presupposed by the old dichotomy. The theory that remains is the practice-embedded theory of participant knowledge, as contrasted with the traditional spectator-like ‘theory from nowhere’: the salvaged ‘theory’ being, if you like, of ‘knowing practice’. The main target of PPP is, accordingly, educational (and moral) theory of the traditional kind, embodied in all sorts of educational ‘technicisms’. Dunne claims to have been moved to write his monumental work in response to one such technicism, the behavioural-objectives model (1993, p. 1), and Carr directs his animadversions against all ‘technological’ views of teaching and curriculum (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 35). Squires (1999, p. 17) somewhat cheekily suggests that the impact of the PPP in England may be due to its comfortable fit there with a ‘quasi-literary and anti-technological’ ethos, where experts are commonly mistrusted and abstractions regarded as alien. That would, however, not explain the positive reception of the PPP in Scandinavia: a culture that (perhaps through the influence of a German educational tradition) tends to be less antagonistic to technical and even bureaucratic interventions. A more plausible historical explanation of the PPP’s popularity is probably its relatedness to a prominent anti-foundationalist stance in contemporary philosophy.

My chief aim in this essay, however, is not to trace further the motivational or historical roots of the PPP, nor to connect it to other ideological currents; it is, rather, to explore and challenge some of its substantive claims. Most importantly, I will do so from what I believe to be an Aristotelian perspective. The proponents of the PPP have, I contend, recast and reconceived, rather than retrieved, Aristotelian ideas on a number of issues, so that the Aristotelian foundation, on which the PPP is supposed to build, has been changed beyond recognition. Showing that the PPP misconstrues Aristotle on various counts is, of course, not tantamount to showing that the substantive claims of the PPP—insofar as they are claims about contemporary educational issues as distinct from claims about Aristotle’s views—are wrong. Since my motivation is substantive rather than textual, however, I do hope that some of the Aristotelian arguments against the PPP that will unfold during the course of my discussion will be found persuasive in themselves and not only exegetically so.

In the following, I identify four cardinal claims of the PPP and dispute them in Sections 2–5, respectively. These claims are:

a) Aristotle’s epistemology and methodology imply a stance that is essentially, with regard to practical philosophy, anti-method and anti-theory.
b) ‘Producing’, under the rubric of techné, as opposed to ‘acting’ under the rubric of phronesis, is an unproblematically codifiable process.
c) Phronesis must be given a particularist interpretation.
d) Teaching is best understood as praxis in the Aristotelian sense, guided by phronesis.

When reading the works of the PPP’s advocates, I have repeatedly been reminded of an old Chinese fable about a certain Lord Ye who professed to be so fond of
dragons that all the decorations and carvings in his house had to bear the design of that mythical animal. On learning this, the Dragon in the Heaven descended from on high to pay him a visit; it poked its head in at the window and swung its tail into Lord Ye’s house. At the sight of the dragon, however, the Lord turned pale and white-lipped and immediately took to his heels. The upshot of the fable was that Lord Ye did not really love dragons; what he did love was something in the shape of a dragon, but not a real one. The same, I suggest in what follows, may apply to the advocates of the PPP and their professed love of Aristotle.

2. Aristotle as Anti-method, Anti-theory?

Do Aristotle’s epistemology and methodology imply a stance that is essentially, with regard to practical philosophy (most importantly here: morally and educationally), anti-method and anti-theory? Before determining an Aristotelian response to that question, let us explore the answer that can be extracted from the advocates of the PPP.

In an article that appeared in a nursing journal, but which draws mainly on the writings of Dunne and W. Carr, the author unequivocally states that phronesis should replace ‘research-based practice’ (in nursing) and we should abandon any philosophical assumptions about the superiority of scientific research (Flaming, 2001). Whilst Carr formulates his views less crudely, he, too, places no stock in theory and method: ‘notions like “theory”, “application” and “method” have no place in practical reasoning and thus play no meaningful role in a form of philosophy specifically intended to contribute to its development’ (2004, p. 62). Carr stresses the point that educational practice is not the application of (a time-and-place independent) educational theory; nor is educational theory an applied theory that draws on theories from philosophy, social sciences or other forms of knowledge (1995, pp. 35–8). The opposition here is to technical rationality and rational planning, guided by disembedded, abstract theories. Out with such theories go the Enlightenment notions of rationality, objectivity and truth, in particular the idea that objective knowledge can be used instrumentally to explain educational phenomena and solve educational problems: ‘There are no “educational phenomena” apart from the practices of those engaged in educational activities, no “educational problems” apart from those arising from these practices’ (ibid., p. 37; see also Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 144).

While being ‘anti-theory’ and ‘anti-method’ with respect to the ideals embodied in the allegedly reigning Enlightenment notion of (scientific) method and (applied) theory, the PPP does not simply reject wholesale all theory and method. As noted in Section 1, there is still room for theory in a non-traditional sense, theory that is practice-confined and perspectivist. Educational practice is always, it is readily admitted, guided by some theory, but such theory is internal to the practice and liable to all the exigencies of the latter. The relevant theory is not something that a spectator, a third-person theorist, could analyse and evaluate, but rather something that has to be lived through by a participant. The ‘truths’ that such a theory tells ‘must be seen as located in particular historical circumstances and social contexts, and as answers to particular questions asked in the intellectual context of
There is also some room for *method* but, once again, not ‘method’ in the traditional Enlightenment sense, where the objects of research are understood as being independent of the researcher, but rather method that views truth as socially-constructed and practice-embedded and whose aim is action rather than data: in particular, the conscious transformation of the practices themselves, by insiders, in order to achieve goals that are internal to those practices. The method under description is, as the reader will have gathered, that of ‘action-research’ whose aim is heightened dialectical self-reflection of practitioners (for example, teachers) and their subsequent empowerment to improve the relevant practices from within (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp. 180–184). All the main buzzwords here—‘critical social science’, ‘emancipatory action-research’ ‘dialectical, reflexive understanding’, ‘internal transformation’ and so on—are derived not from Aristotle (at least not directly) but from critical theory, that is, from a school of thought whose ultimate aim was, despite its perspectivist leanings, reform, liberation and justice for all mankind. Thanks to its Marxist roots, critical theory thus champions the enlightenment of practitioners (if not the ‘enlightenment’ of the Enlightenment) which has direct consequences for their transformed social action: action that requires an integration of theory and practice in a dialectical process of reflection and political struggle carried out by groups for the purpose of their own emancipation (ibid., p. 144).

Precisely because of this ultimate emancipatory aim, the PPP must, in spite of its anti-realist, non-foundationalist, perspectivist and, if you like, anti-theory, epistemology, distinguish itself from the radical relativism and irrationalism of contemporary postmodernism that has, for instance, long abandoned any emancipatory aspirations (since the very idea of emancipation rests on the notion of a true self which has become alienated from itself, a self whose existence postmodernism emphatically rejects). Dunne poetically describes this as a balancing act where the PPP-advocate needs to skate on ice that is neither that of crystalline technicist purity, nor the soft, melting ice of postmodernism (1993, pp. 377–8). W. Carr uses considerable resourcefulness in trying to deflect the postmodern challenge. His main strategy is to reinterpret postmodernism, so that while it retains its post-analytic, post-empiricist thrust, it avoids the precarious flight into unreason. Postmodernism indicates, on Carr’s reading, ‘not so much that modernity has come to an end as that it has now entered a new phase’ (1995, p. 123). The problem with such a reading, however, is that it forfeits its relation to the original and provocative claims made by theorists such as Lyotard and Derrida in direct proportion as it achieves its congeniality to critical theory and the PPP (see, e.g., Kristjánsson, 2002, pp. 57–61). Carr’s frequent allusions to emancipation and self-understanding would make any true postmodernist shudder; but overlooking Carr’s somewhat far-stretched strategy in saving the PPP from the excesses of postmodernism, let us turn back to Aristotle himself.

The PPP is supposed to be, if not strictly Aristotelian, then at least Aristotle-inspired. Thus it seems natural to ask the question broached at the beginning of this Section. Would Aristotle bestow his benediction on the kind of anti-method, anti-theory (in
the traditional sense) stance implicit in the PPP? As far as I can see, Carr’s elucidation of the notions of method and theory sets Aristotle’s views on these matters utterly at naught. Aristotle’s ‘ice’ is in fact more the ‘crystalline’ one of traditional theory than the semi-soft one of the PPP, let alone the melting one of postmodernism.

Aristotle’s philosophical method is primarily directed at finding the ‘first principles’ (archai) of things. To that end, he claims that any philosophical inquiry should start from the relevant ‘appearances’ (phainomena). Sometimes these appearances are simply empirical evidence collected for a theory through a process of induction and generalisation with the aim of removing our ignorance about the matter at hand. Sometimes the aim is, rather, to remove conflicts and difficulties in the beliefs (endoxa) that we already have. In the latter kind of case, Aristotle utilises the method of dialectic, handed down to him by Socrates and Plato. Such dialectic seeks coherence and mutual adjustment until only the most consistent and authoritative beliefs remain. It is, however, not a mere coherence method such as Rawls’ much-touted one of ‘reflective equilibrium’, for Aristotle allows himself to be systematically selective in his attitude to common beliefs. It is not only the case that ‘we’, who possess the original endoxa, must be fairly reflective people (that is also a condition in Rawls’ method), but, more importantly, that Aristotle incorporates in his dialectic certain features of the world which he deems necessary for the world, or for certain units of it, to be objects of scientific inquiry and explanation in the first place. Now, Rawls famously modified his originally ‘narrow’ reflective equilibrium to a ‘wider’ one, taking account not only of moral principles and considered moral judgements but also of certain background theories about the world. However, those theories had, in turn, to be justified in terms of their fit with considered moral judgements, which made his proposal vulnerable to a charge of circularity. By contrast, when Aristotle employs what could be called ‘strong dialectic’, instead of ‘pure dialectic’, he adds to the dialectic certain assumptions (qua premises) that no one has necessarily considered before, but which he considers us to have distinct metaphysical or psychological reasons for recognising, such as the assumption that the soul is the ‘form’ of the body, or that human beings have a certain nature that must be realised if they are to live a flourishing life (see Irwin, 1990, for a fuller account of Aristotle’s method).

Aristotle obviously did not possess the modern concepts of ‘scientific theory’ and ‘applied science’, but if we explore his account of human nature and ethical conduct, what emerges is suspiciously much like a ‘theory’ in that very traditional sense which the PPP-advocates so ardently renounce. It is a theory about ‘happiness’ as the ultimate good of human beings, for the sake of which we do all other things (Aristotle, 1985, pp. 1–5 [1094a–1095a]). It is, more specifically, a universal ‘ethical theory’ (Irwin, 1990, p. 467), a theory which transcends mere common beliefs and any particular human ‘practices’. What we must be aware of, however, is that when Aristotle produces generalisations as parts of his theories, those tend to relate to natural norms rather than mere frequencies. Claims such as ‘all chickens have wings’ or ‘pleasure completes full virtue’ do not describe usual regularities but normative regularities (having to do with the natural essence of the object in question): those generalisations would not be defeated by the fact that there exist

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deformed (wingless) chickens or that sometimes virtue fails to produce pleasure (in badly brought-up persons). All such generalisations have a certain scope (‘the norm’) and it is not always possible to build a specification of the scope into the generalisation itself, except by saying that the generalisation applies in the absence of any abnormal conditions (Irwin, 2000, 109–12; cf. Karlsson, 1995). I will exploit this point further in Section 4.

The advocates of the PPP try to establish an anti-realist, non-foundationalist, perspectivist account of education and educational theory with reference to a philosopher whose epistemology and methodology are unabashedly realist, foundationalist (naturalist) and cosmopolitan. The odds must surely be seen to be stacked against such an enterprise, or, in the tactful words of David Carr, ‘put something of a strain’ on the loyalties of its proponents (1995a, p. 146). Aristotle aside, consider any historically famous account of education from Plato to Dewey. Almost all of those accounts embody the features of a theory, in the same sense as Aristotle’s account of the human good is a theory: they are general, abstract, systematic, explicit, universalisable and give recommendations about practical problems. They are about what human beings need in order to flourish, how they learn and, subsequently, how they should be taught. They are, in other words, ‘applied theories’ in the sense denounced by W. Carr. Or consider a more recent theory, in which I happen to be personally interested, the theory of socio-emotional learning, based on certain psychological-cum-philosophical ideas about the importance of emotional ‘literacy’ or ‘intelligence’ and how this can be cultivated in students (Elias et al., 1997).

How would the PPP judge such a theory: as untenable without further inspection simply because it is a non-situated (that is, a non-specific-practice-embedded) theory—or as a theory that could only have possible relevance within a particular practice? Whatever else can be said for or against those responses, they are both at least thoroughly un-Aristotelian, given his methodology described above as well as his blatantly anti-perspectivist observation that ‘in our travels we can see how every human being is akin … to a human being’ (1985, p. 208 [1155a]). It is no wonder that Dunne worries, at the beginning of his book, about the validity of his own endeavour, since its conclusions admit of no (practice-neutral) ‘external criterion’—although he denies at the end, somewhat sanguinely, that the circularity and inevitable prejudices of his argumentation are bound to discredit it intellectually (1993, pp. 25–6).

If Aristotle’s method and theory-construction are light years away from those of the PPP, as I have argued, why has the anti-theory stance of the latter then been aligned to Aristotle in the first place? This probably stems from Aristotle’s separation of theoretical from practical knowledge: *theoria* from both *techné* and *phronesis*. When Dunne says that ‘the spheres of theory and practice are incommensurable’ for Aristotle (ibid., p. 238), this is quite true, in the sense that *theoria* distinguishes itself from the other two forms of knowledge. But the problem is that *theoria* in Aristotle has got very little do to with what we nowadays refer to as a scientific (or, for that matter, educational or moral) *theory*. *Theoria* refers to knowledge of things which are *necessary* (non-contingent), that cannot be otherwise than they are. It is *a priori* knowledge of the unchanging: what we would, post-Frege, confine to the
sphere of pure mathematics and logic. And although Aristotle’s notion of the sphere of the unchanging was evidently wider than ours (incorporating, for instance, the movements of the heavenly bodies), his *theoria* did not encompass what I have above referred to as educational or moral theories. It is, therefore, illicit to conclude that because Aristotle considered *theoria* incommensurable with practical (contingent) matters, he also considered educational and moral theories (in the traditional sense) irrelevant for practice (cf. Squires, 2003, p. 5).

This is why Flaming (2001) errs when he claims that because nursing is a practical (moral) endeavour, concerned with the *eudaimonia* of patients, it cannot be research-based. This is also why Saugstad (2002) commits a number of missteps in her multi-faceted argument for the claim that the Aristotelian theory-practice distinction undermines various suppositions of current educational wisdom. It is quite true that ‘Aristotle delimits the theoretical from the practical domain’ and that he did not consider knowledge from the former domain to be transformable into ‘applied practical knowledge’; nor did he, accordingly, believe in a ‘one-to-one relationship’ between a given specific theory and a given practice (ibid., pp. 385–6). But this is all true because Saugstad is thinking of theory as *theoria*; these are mere truisms that have little, if anything, to do with current educational conventions or wisdom. Nothing in Aristotle’s discussion of *theoria* versus *techné* and *phronesis* excludes the possibility that a particular moral and educational theory, yielded through Aristotle’s inductive method or that of strong dialectic, could be directly applicable to educational practice. There may, however, be other reasons to be found in Aristotle’s writings for rejecting such a possibility; I will consider (but ultimately reject) their existence later in this essay.

Enough has, I hope, been said to answer in the negative the question posed at the beginning of the present Section. Aristotle’s epistemology and methodology do not imply a stance that is essentially, with regard to practical philosophy, anti-method and anti-theory. When W. Carr claims that the ‘story of the demise and eventual collapse of the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy is ... just a part of the complex history of the transition from “classical” to “modern” philosophy that began in the seventeenth century’ (2004, p. 63), he seems to be conflating two historical developments. It is indeed true that the rise of modernity signalled the demise of Aristotle’s ideas of human nature and *telos* (as memorably recorded by MacIntyre, 1981), as well as, of course, his cosmology. At the same time, however, modern times heralded a return to a more Aristotelian empirically-based epistemology and methodology, as opposed to medieval (and Platonic) rationalism. If anything, quite a lot of modern ‘practical philosophy’, from Marx to contemporary virtue ethics, has a distinctively Aristotelian flavour.

3. An Unproblematic Codification of *Techné*?

Advocates of the PPP are concerned to distance themselves not only from the ‘technicism’ involved in Aristotle’s *theoria*, if applied to practical matters, but also from the ‘technicism’ implicit in one of the two forms of practical thought, namely *techné*. According to the received wisdom here, *techné* gives rise to unproblematically
codifiable ‘makings’—which are out of step with any genuine teaching practice—as opposed to the problematic and uncodifiable ‘doings’ which are guided by *phronesis*. Before turning to the latter, something needs to be said about the former.

The received wisdom about *techné*, on which the *PPP* relies, can be fleshed out in more detail as follows. In *techné* we have a clear, perfect idea of a plan or design (*eidos*). *Techné* is simply instrumental thinking, which helps us bring this *eidos* into being through some mechanical means, and the process of doing so is called *poiesis* (making, production, manufacturing). The prototype of *poiesis* is the work of the craftsman or artisan, such as the potter who, more or less unreflectively, directs his actions towards the given end: an end which lies in the product, not in the process, let alone in any changes effected on himself as a person (see, e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp. 32–3). Since the production process and end-product can be precisely specified by the maker prior to the means-end activity in question, we are talking here about an unproblematically codifiable outcome. It is, then, specifically this ‘closed’ (as opposed to ‘open-ended’) kind of thinking and making that is frowned upon by the advocates of the *PPP* as a model for teaching or curriculum planning—where the practitioner becomes, so to speak, a technocrat or a passive implementor, very much like the proclaimer of logical truths (on the similarities between *techné* and *theoria* in this regard, see Dunne, 1993, p. 253). Recall here Dunne’s original *bête noire* of behavioural objectives in teaching: how can the complexities of teaching and learning be reduced to such an instrumental and mechanistic technology?

While there is some textual evidence for this mechanical reading of *techné* in Aristotle’s writings, quite a considerable part of his treatment of *techné* defies the rigid stereotype of the unreflective artisan. Some of Aristotle’s most vivid examples of the practitioners of *techné* involve not potters and carpenters, but rather medical doctors, navigators and performing artists. And there, a much subtler picture of the process from *eidos* through *poiesis* to end-product appears, a much more problematic relationship between production and the produced (which is a change of state or a performance rather than an artefact): a picture which blunts the force of the contrast between *techné* and *phronesis* as regards the codifiability of the outcome. It is, for instance, clear that Aristotle considers medicine as no mere formulaic or rule-governed activity (Squires, 2003, p. 4), let alone as based on a simple ‘value-free’ means-end reasoning (*contra* W. Carr’s description of *techné*, 2004, p. 61). Here the precision and codifiability of the potter’s *techné* is lacking, for knowledge of the universal cannot be unproblematically translated to an individual: knowledge of health in general is not enough to cure a sick Socrates; you have to know the specifics of his ailments before you prescribe a cure (see further in Dunne, 1993, p. 282). When one’s actions are not imposed on materials but directed towards other persons (such as in medicine or the performing arts) or the forces of wind and weather (such as in navigation), perfect precision eludes us, and one cannot determine with perfect accuracy in advance the efficacy of one’s deeds (cf. ibid., p. 359).

Perhaps the most enduring achievement of Dunne’s work (ibid.,) is to have retrieved this concept of *techné* as only problematically codifiable from Aristotle’s writings: namely, to have shown that the polarity between theoretical and experiential emphases, which has commonly been taken to coincide with the distinction between
techné and *phronesis* can, on closer scrutiny, be discerned within the concept of techné itself (ibid., p. 229). This distinction between two kinds of techné, a) where all rules are unproblematically formulable in advance, and b) where they are not, and deliberate reasoning about particular cases is required, is indeed an important one and helps us reject the gambit offered by the strict techné-*phronesis* dichotomy. It is all the more moot why Dunne keeps referring to the notion of non-technical techné as Aristotle’s ‘unofficial’ concept (e.g., ibid., p. 261), as if refusing to let go of the received wisdom of all techné as unproblematically codifiable, which his careful analysis has, in fact, succeeding in undermining. Tellingly, perhaps, Dunne admits that Aristotle’s frequent allusions to examples of techné (in particular, medical analogies) in his explorations of the moral virtues may be seen as ‘embarrassing’ for a thesis as his own, which tries to show that in setting up *phronesis* as the paradigm of ethical knowledge, Aristotle wanted to cordon off the field of techné (ibid., pp. 245–6). It is almost as if Dunne here consciously concedes that he needs to retain a distinction, which he has himself shown to be seriously overdrawn, in order to serve the interests of the PPP.

At this point, I part ways with Dunne. What for me stands out from Aristotle’s explorations of techné is that, in some of its most salient instantiations, there is little if any difference between it and *phronesis* with regard to codifiability. Both guide actions which require careful advance scrutiny of particular circumstances and which defy any rule-fetishism. That neither techné (in this common sense) nor *phronesis* are unproblematically codifiable is, thus, beyond doubt; whether they are necessarily uncodifiable is another question that we must address in the following Section.

4. A Particularist Interpretation of *Phronesis*?

Aristotle’s *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue that serves the moral virtues. For while the latter make ‘the goal correct’, *phronesis* ‘makes what promotes the goal [correct]’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 168 [1144a]). *Phronesis* is not only about universal values ‘since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars’ (ibid., p. 158 [1141b]). This intellectual virtue helps the moral (character) virtues find their right ends and the suitable means to their ends. More specifically, *phronesis* ‘is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being’ (ibid., p. 154 [1140b]).

Like other character traits, *phronesis* owes its inception and growth chiefly to instruction and habituation. Therefore, it is ‘very important, indeed all-important’ to be inculcated into the right sort of habits from youth (ibid., p. 35 [1103b]). For although *phronesis* can later be used to reconsider and revise those habits (moral dispositions) with which we were originally instilled, it will not do so unless we have been trained to appreciate the importance of such revisions. That is, although *phronesis* is an intellectual disposition, rather than a moral disposition of action and reaction, it is, in a sense, also a habit which gradually kicks in through performance of the activities that the habit embodies; indeed, all the intellectual virtues are *hexeis* and thus acquired by habit. Therefore, too, *phronesis* needs time and experience.
These are some of the general Aristotelian statements about *phronesis* that the advocates of the PPP use as grist for their mill. They see it as a dynamic, flexible and open-textured concept that is highly relevant to education. The main emphasis is put on the intimate bond between *phronesis* and the perceptual particularities of human experience. While *phronesis* incorporates practical knowledge, it is ‘not itself theory’ and neither is it ‘the application of theory to particular cases’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 157). To think otherwise is to succumb to what Gadamer calls the ‘illusion of experience perfected and replaced by knowledge’ (cited in ibid., p. 306). In the sphere of *phronesis*, ‘practical-moral universals cannot unproblematically cover or include particular cases’ precisely because the former contain in themselves ‘an element of indeterminateness which is removed only through confrontation with particular cases’ (ibid., p. 311). This is, in Dunne’s words, so far from being a defect that it is, rather, ‘the great merit’ of *phronesis* (ibid., p. 314). The final, decisive move of the PPP, then, is to link *phronesis* up with teaching as *praxis*. Such *praxis* is no longer seen as the embarrassing but soon overcome condition of incomplete theory (ibid., p. 9). Just as the meaning of any ethical principle must be understood and interpreted in relation to a particular situation within a particular practice, so the teacher’s capacity for practical reasoning cannot first be taught ‘in theory’ and then applied ‘in practice’. Instead, it is a capacity that can only be acquired by an individual who has been initiated into a particular practice and has learnt to direct his activities towards goods which are internal to that practice (W. Carr, 1995, p. 69; 2004, p. 61).

I will probe more exactly the idea of teaching as *praxis* in the final Section, but let us first explore the (moral) particularist interpretation given to *phronesis*, by advocates of the PPP, as indicated in the foregoing paragraph. A particularist view of morality considers the structure of moral reality best captured by sensitivity to particular situations rather than any system of moral theory/theories. In contrast to *generalism*, which holds that some properties, wherever and whenever they are instantiated, always count in favour of or against some action/reactio, *particularism* maintains that the very same property may count morally in favour in some circumstances and against in others (Dancy, 1993, pp. 60). In other words, while moral properties supervene on non-moral ones, the former are shapeless with regard to the latter: there is no one-to-one relationship between a given factual situation and a required moral action/reaction. According to a particularist interpretation of Aristotle’s *phronesis*, the passages where he refers to particular perceptions as being at the heart of *phronesis* bring to the fore what is most essential about this virtue: that it defies any generalisations except insofar as such generalisations are viewed as incomplete summaries of the considerations that the virtuous person recognises.

Now, there are many forms of particularism, with the most radical one perhaps being Moorean intuitionism which considers moral properties as *sui generis*. It is not clear whether all the devotees of the PPP would ascribe to precisely the same understanding of Aristotle’s *phronesis*, but what is beyond controversy is that all of them would interpret it in a particularist way, and that at least some salient remarks betoken an intuitionist reading. Phrases such as ‘particularist discernment’, ‘intuitive artistry’, ‘discrimination’, ‘perceptual capacity’, ‘illative sense’ and ‘situational
appreciation’ abound. To unpack these, our best bet is returning to Dunne (1993), on whom most accounts of the PPP ultimately draw. Dunne is fascinated by Aristotle’s analogy of *phronesis* to vision. Experience is, for Dunne, a comprehensive situating process of which knowledge and virtue are specific moments and to which *phronesis* contributes ‘an eye’. *Phronesis* is, in other words, the eye of moral experience: the discernment of particular situations that enables us ‘to see aright’ every time, but which remains ultimately experiential rather than universal ‘since the universals within its grasp are always modifiable in the light of its continuing exposure to particular cases’ (ibid., pp. 280, 293, 297, 361). It is as if deciding what to do is a matter of staring at the relevant situation until its unique ‘shape’ jumps out at you (cf. Bakhurst, 2000, p. 173). But how do we know whether the shape that jumps out at us is really the correct one and not some kind of a perceptual illusion? We discover that by consulting the experienced *phronimos* who is ultimately the standard and yardstick of what is fine and pleasant (Dunne, 1999, p. 55). If our choice of action would also be his in the relevant situation, we know that we are on the right track. Instead of principles, we trust persons. The *logos* of the situation is thus defined obliquely as a *logos* such as the *phronimos* would work out (Dunne, 1993, pp. 35, 258, 312; cf. Aristotle, 1985, p. 44 [1107a]).

What is at fault, in my view, with this particularist interpretation of *phronesis* is that it sits loosely with, or even radically diverges from, essential elements of Aristotle’s moral system. There is no denying the fact that Aristotle warned us against looking for the same precision in matters of moral judgement as in mathematics. There is also no denying the fact that he takes *phronesis* to be concerned with situated particularities that are difficult to capture in a general account. Neither of these, however, is sufficient to warrant a particularist interpretation of *phronesis*. For that, more is needed: what must be established is the priority of particular truths with regard to general truths, the priority of particular perceptions with regard to universal beliefs, and the priority of the *phronimos’* verdict with regard to the morally correct verdict. More specifically, what must be shown is that Aristotle thought that a) any generalising (moral) truth must be abandoned in favour of particular (moral) truths or, at least, reduced to a mere summary of such truths, b) perception of particulars is epistemologically prior to the guidance of universal beliefs and c) what is morally correct is such because the *phronimos* deems it to be such, not the other way round, that the *phronimos* deems what is morally correct to be such because it is, in fact, such.

The problem for the PPP is that none of these claims have sufficient grounding in Aristotle’s writings (see, e.g., Irwin, 2000). As for a), Aristotle’s account of the moral virtues involves various general truths about the characteristics of different virtuous persons (as brave, temperate, etc.). When he brings in particular examples, he does not abandon generalisations and tell us to attend only to the particularities of the described situation; rather he describes the generalisations we should look for. That those are often not unproblematically applicable to particular cases stems, *inter alia*, from the fact that Aristotle’s notion of a generalisation is one of normality, not of frequency (a point foreshadowed in Section 2), and therefore has scope-limitations built into it. It fits well with Aristotle’s method (see again my discussion in Section
2) to say that universals are ultimately derived from particulars, but that is not tantamount to considering them reducible to mere summaries of such particulars. As for b), Aristotle’s much-cited assertion that \textit{phronesis} is about particulars and therefore needs perception (1985, p. 161 [1142a]) says nothing about the epistemological priority of perception. A much simpler interpretation would be that Aristotle considered universal moral beliefs, fully capable of taking into account every possible situation—while logically possible—so complicated that they would in actuality be impossible to learn and apply. Instead of trying to achieve such a super-human feat, it would be better to acquire a perceptual awareness that guided us to the right answer in the greatest number of factual situations (Irwin, 2000, p. 120). As for c), Slote (1992, p. 89) has argued convincingly that, for Aristotle, standards for proper action and emotion are followed by the \textit{phronimos} because they are morally appropriate, and not the other way round (that they are morally appropriate because they are followed by the \textit{phronimos}). The reason why I concur with Slote is that Aristotle does not shirk from detailed discussions of moral conflicts and how they should be solved. Although ‘it is not easy to define [such] matters exactly’, he says, we ‘must try to offer help’ (1985, pp. 36, 241 [1104a, 1164b]; see further in Kristjánsson, 2002, p. 71). This, of course, does not subvert the important point that we must follow the \textit{phronimoi} in order to acquire the experience and the basic virtues that enable us to appreciate the proper standards.

The real nub of the matter is not so much that the alternative interpretations offered by me, in a)-c) above, are \textit{individually} simpler and/or more persuasive than those offered by the PPP-enthusiasts (although I do take them to be both simpler and more persuasive, in light of Aristotle’s own text). The nub is, rather, that taken \textit{collectively}, they sit much more comfortably with the view of a dyed-in-the-wool moral naturalist who believed that ‘first principles’ about ethical standards were to be found in human nature: in facts about what makes us flourish as human beings. As I argued in Section 2, Aristotle does not ‘disabuse us of theory’ (such as Dunne, for one, maintains, 1993, p. 313). He presents us with a theory of the human \textit{telos} and with a detailed account of the virtues as golden means between two extremes in various spheres of human conduct. As Noel (1999) correctly points out, Aristotle’s discussion of \textit{phronesis} is placed firmly within his complete ethical theory of living, and although situational perception is one the ingredients of \textit{phronesis}, its moral and rational dimensions, as an intellectual virtue, must not be overlooked.

My conclusion about the nature of \textit{phronesis}—as, indeed, that of the \textit{techné} of the medical doctor or the navigator—is that, while not unproblematically codifiable, it is also not necessarily, but only contingently, uncodifiable. A perfect moral theory, which resolved once and for all every question of application, would be possible for a perfect being. Given that human beings are imperfect, however, and that the normal is not even always the usual, such a theory eludes them and they must, instead, rely on a theory that requires frequent rectification through confrontations with novel situations. Such a theory demands rather than excludes reflection on particularities (see, e.g., Nussbaum, 2000). But that makes it no less of a (universal) theory, any more than the law is any less of a (universal) law although it has to be rectified.

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frequently to take account of ‘what the legislator would have said himself if he had been present there, and what he would have prescribed, had he known, in his legislation’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 145 [1137b]). Non-necessary, but actual, uncodifiability is no novelty in a moral theory; indeed it is difficult to think of any moral theory (even a utilitarian one), except of the most rigid formalist kind, which would not accommodate such uncodifiability. His accommodation of it does not render Aristotle a moral particularist.

I would be tempted to make a detour at this point to argue that even if Aristotle had not, as a matter of fact, accepted the need for moral theory, he should have done so (for incisive arguments in favour of a moral theory, see Tänsnsjo, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000). I will resist that temptation here except to make one final point. Much of the work of the advocates of the PPP, including Dunne’s book, seems inspired by the ripple effect of MacIntyre’s After Virtue, and especially his retrieval of the notion of moral practice (1981). MacIntyre has, by contrast, no praise for the kind of perceptual particularism championed in the PPP. He would, no doubt, consider the failure to theorise moral judgements—and to rely, instead, on a moral nose—as one more graphic illustration of the poverty of ethical thinking after the collapse of the Enlightenment project (cf. Bakhurst, 2000, pp. 166–7, on MacIntyre’s debunking of intuitionism). While skills of discernment are, for MacIntyre as for Aristotle, central to moral wisdom, they are not exhaustive of moral wisdom. The particularist aspirations of the PPP are, thus, not part of a MacIntyrean project of re-grounding morality and, more importantly, as I have argued in this Section, not part of an Aristotelian project either.

5. Teaching as Praxis?

According to the PPP, teaching is to be understood as praxis and teaching excellence as phronesis: ‘Expertise under this view does not consist of designing a set of sequenced means or techniques which “drive” learners towards expected learning outcomes. It consists of spontaneous and flexible direction and redirection of the learning enterprise, guided by a sensitive reading of the subtle changes and responses of other participants in the enterprise’ (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 37). The ends of the teaching practice (qua praxis) cannot be specified in advance of engaging in it since they are inseparable from the practice: that is, internal to it (Carr, 2004, p. 61). Therefore, the criteria of teaching competence can never be rigorously and exhaustively specified (Dunne, 1993, p. 159).

We see how the idea of the essential uncodifiability of phronesis, as opposed to techné, permeates the whole notion of teaching as praxis. My arguments, in the last two Sections, for the similarities between (certain kinds of) techné, on the one hand, and phronesis, on the other, and the mere non-necessary uncodifiability of both, might seem to spell some initial trouble for this whole notion. Rather than pursuing that line of argument, however, let us concentrate on an essential difference between techné and phronesis that has so far gone unmentioned but which has ample textual evidence in Aristotle’s writings and gives rise to an objection which cuts even more deeply into the notion of teaching as praxis.
Phronesis is the virtue of a person who knows how to live well. Praxis, the sphere of phronetic activity, has an end in itself (namely good ethical conduct), whereas mere production (poiesis) has not: the latter only has an end beyond itself (Aristotle, 1985, p. 154 [1140b]). Whereas we cannot be ‘fully good’ without phronesis (ibid., p. 171 [1144b]), we can, in principle, be so without techné, that is, without partaking in any of the activities associated with particular kinds of techné (without being a medical doctor, potter, navigator, etc.). That phronetic activity has an end in itself must not be understood to imply, along contemporary virtue-ethics lines, that the fundamental reason for being virtuous is the beneficial effect on oneself. There is no hint in Aristotle of the self-centredness assumption that makes the agent the focus of self-concerning sanctimonious attention, which mars so much of current virtue ethics; in contrast, the greatest virtues, in Aristotle’s view, are necessarily those most useful to others (for an appraisal of the Aristotelian position here, see Kristjánsson, 2002, s. 2.2; cf. Irwin, 1990, p. 373). Nevertheless, one of the essential reasons for being good is the effect on your own eudaimonia; that is why being good is an end in itself.

Now, the natural conclusion to draw from this is that praxis is the sphere of ethical conduct; its rationale is living and acting well because of their intrinsic value, and its highest expression is in politics where people co-operate within a society. Nowhere in Aristotle is praxis related to specific activities or domains such as medicine or, for that matter, teaching; nowhere is it as much as hinted at that the sphere of phronesis should be generalised beyond ethical engagements to cover activities with distinct ends beyond themselves (Squires, 1999, pp. 112–16; 2003, p. 2; Waring, 2000). What implications does this carry for the notion of teaching as praxis? One response would be to acknowledge that a crucial hiatus has appeared and simply to relinquish this notion; another response, that I will refer to as the bullet-biting manoeuvre, would be to countenance the Aristotelian idea that praxis is solely concerned with ethical engagements and to conclude, further, that teaching is exclusively an ethical activity, thus rescuing the notion of teaching-as-praxis by biting the bullet aimed at it. After all, Aristotle never mentions teaching as an example of poiesis either, so why could he not simply have thought of it as activity with an end in itself?

This second tack is taken by David Carr. He argues that teaching cannot be reduced to a set of skills or the transference of knowledge. Rather, the deliverances of teaching are best considered to be personal, moral virtues, understood as reflective or evaluative dispositions. Indeed, Carr contends that teaching is a prime example of that sort of activity in which almost all the important practical decisions which need to be made are of a moral rather than technical nature, and that so-called educational theories are best regarded as shorthand characterisations of essentially moral or evaluative perspectives (D. Carr, 1995a; 1995b; 1999). What should be noted is that Carr moralises the notion of teaching as praxis here far beyond the claims of his namesake Wilfred, as well as those of Dunne: he even accuses them of a dangerous, if hidden, aspiration towards a conception of practical reason which might eventually bridge the gap between techné and phronesis, via their exaggerated experiential approach to teaching as a ‘hands on’ practice (D. Carr, 1995b, p. 330 [footnote 21]; 1995a, p. 147).

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I must own up to a certain predilection for D. Carr’s bullet-biting manoeuvre. After all, all teaching has a moral dimension and perhaps carries the most obvious ethical load of any profession. I would even go as far as acquiescing to Fritz Oser’s claim (1992) that the idea of professionalism in teaching must necessarily involve the capacity to stimulate moral discourse. Those sympathies notwithstanding, I still think that the bullet-biting manoeuvre must be resisted. The reason for that is twofold. First, it must not be forgotten that Aristotle’s favoured teaching methods are those of habituation and direct instruction, where the teacher instructs the learner about some object: some body of knowledge or some discipline. Teaching and learning never represent, in Aristotle’s writings, merely an interpersonal relationship without a further independent object. The second and more general (Aristotle-independent) reason for resisting the bullet-biting manoeuvre is the queerness of the idea of teaching as having an end in itself. Consider a teacher stranded alone on a luxuriant desert island. This would not prevent him from continuing to engage in an ethical endeavour, a praxis. He could, for instance, continue to practise moderation in food and drink and use his phronesis to that end. That pursuit would be fully intelligible, and indeed commendable, even if it never happened to have any further moral consequences except for himself (for instance, if he were never rescued). Consider, on the other hand, this same teacher continuing to teach on his desert island in front of the seagulls and the penguins. We could perhaps render that activity intelligible if the teacher’s motivation was to ‘keep fit’ as a teacher: to practise his voice and methods of presentation. But the activity would not be intelligible as teaching. Teaching requires an audience which learns, and it seems to be so far from the truth that the goods of teaching practice are not understandable independent of that practice, that the very opposite seem to hold: the goods of teaching are only understandable independent of the practice since the end of that practice is ‘a product beyond the activity’ (on such ends, see Aristotle, 1985, p. 1 [1094a]). This is why there need be no logical connection between a teacher’s morality and the ‘goodness’ of the product of teaching. A generally immoral person could, in principle, be a good maths teacher, for example, as long he does not treat his maths students immorally (cf. Orton, 1998, p. 179).

It might be objected that my desert-island example only highlights a rather trivial logical point—that teaching requires both a subject and an object just like some of Aristotle’s moral virtues, for instance ‘special justice’ which ‘must always involve more than one person’ (1985, pp. 146 [1138a])—and that the intrinsic value of teaching could still lie in the activity of teaching rather than a product beyond the activity. But then think of a teacher teaching a group of students in a situation where an evil demon constantly wiped out all memories of the teaching in the students’ minds. The activity in question could still have some kind of intrinsic value (as an inherently pleasant pastime, for example) but surely not intrinsic value qua teaching. It is no wonder that MacIntyre, when elaborating upon the point that all teaching is for the sake of something else and so ‘does not have it own goods’, concludes that ‘teaching itself it not a practice’ although it ‘is put to the service of a variety of practices’ (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002, pp. 8–9).

I see no escape from the conclusion that Aristotle’s definition of praxis as having an end in itself is fatal to the PPP’s notion of teaching as praxis. This does not
mean that *phronesis* is not required for teaching. It is required for teaching precisely to the extent that all teaching has a moral dimension; it is required specifically in values education (the cultivation of a host of moral dispositions to actions and emotions), but more generally in numerous educational decisions about approaches and priorities aimed at the well-being of students. For although Aristotle refused to consider *phronesis* and *technē* ‘included in’ one another (1985, p. 152 [1140a]), he saw a role for *phronesis* in eliciting and monitoring productive (extrinsically valuable) activities (ibid., p. 150 [1139a–1139b]). But this does not make teaching exclusively a *praxis*, because teaching also requires *theoria* (for example, when teaching logic and mathematics) and *technē* (in teaching various productive and performing skills). Orton (1998) comes close to the truth when presenting his ‘balanced model of teacher reasoning’ as resting on all three of the Aristotelian forms of reasoning (cf. Eisner, 2002). Yet it is hard to avoid the conclusion that if teaching is to be described as involving essentially one form of activity rather than the other two, its strongest affinity is with kinds of *poiesis* such as medicine or navigation. The fundamental goal of teaching is, after all, student learning which is a ‘product beyond the activity’ of teaching, although it will later be manifested through the students’ own activities.

The reader may long have realised that the title of the present essay, ‘Smoothing It’, does not carry an allusion to Mark Twain’s vibrant documentation of his adventures during the gold rush mining period in *Roughing It*, but rather to Dunne’s *Back to the Rough Ground*: his call for a return to the rooted roughness—but at the same time the flexibility and open texture—of practical school life, away from the misguided smoothness of theory. The fundamental message of my exploration is that we have, as educators, no good reason for denying ourselves the insights of moral, psychological and educational theory, nor for considering teaching exclusively a *praxis*. There is, at least, no good Aristotelian reason for doing so: that is, for not taking the smooth with the rough.

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**Notes**

1. It may well be true, however, that ‘pro-theory, pro-method’ educational theorists have not been entirely successful in producing cogent accounts of professional practice, including teaching: accounts that resonate convincingly with the experiences of practitioners. This might then explain some of the street credibility of the PPP and related perspectives.

2. A recent issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (vol. 37, no. 2, 2003) was devoted to MacIntyre’s notion of a (moral) practice. It includes a piece by Dunne (2003) where he takes issue with MacIntyre’s denial that teaching is a practice. However, since the present paper is concerned with Aristotle’s, rather than MacIntyre’s, notion of a moral practice, I leave this material out of consideration here.
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