Phronesis and Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice

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DAVID M. MCCOURT, NOV 23 2012

Twin developments have brought Aristotle's notion of *phronēsis*—usually translated as "practical wisdom" or "prudence"—back to the fore in recent years.[i] First, issues like Iraq, climate change, Iran's nuclear program, and the "rise of the rest,"[ii] have led to a realization of the enduring importance of prudent foreign policy. Meanwhile, an academic revolt against neo-positivism[iii] has led scholars to recover *phronēsis* as a form of political knowing. In this essay, consequently, I assess the nature of *phronēsis* in theory and practice. I ask what "phronetic" foreign policy looks like and discuss some examples. Concerned not to lose sight of the context of this re-emergence and what this means for the endeavour, however, I also assess what is at stake in its recovery. This takes us beyond foreign policy, into the relationship between theory and practice, political knowledge and political action.

Phronēsis

Phronēsis is one of the intellectual virtues identified by Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics*.[iv] It is defined in part in contrast to other virtues, most importantly *technē* and *epistēmē*. The former is technical know-how, like the skills of the engineer; the latter is scientifically reproducible knowledge, deriveable from first principles. While these ideas remain familiar, *phronēsis* and its translations have lost much of their meaning. In essence, *phronēsis* is about knowing the right thing to do in the context at hand, in light of the good—for Aristotle, the pursuit of the good life in a well-functioning polis. The important point is not what *phronēsis* is, therefore—Aristotle's notion of the good is equally alien to modern ears,[v] and its applicability to the international realm poses numerous questions—, but in what type of conduct it inheres. A useful example is the way in which a judge adjudicates between competing arguments and evidence,[vi] prudently arriving at the best decision in the circumstances, and in light of possible precedents.

This is a necessarily brief exposition.[vii] Before moving on to examples, however, it is imperative to stress that the concept's re-emergence has been driven by disciplinary concerns: namely the emerging hegemony of rationalism and neo-positivism in US Political Science[viii] and the marginalization of "reflectivist" approaches.[ix] This led to the *Perestroika* movement,[x] and a related set of "turns" in IR—historical, constructivist, relational, and aesthetic to name just a few[xi]—the aim of both being to bring back in aspects of political life deliberately sidelined, like the role history, social context, and practices.[xii] It is here that *phronēsis* attains its prescience.[xiii] The loss of the notion of *phronēsis* has been viewed by scholars as indicative of a wider lacuna at the heart of the post-modern condition. We view knowledge in purely instrumental terms, betrayed by a firm distinction between "theory" and "practice."[xiv] Practical knowing is considered undeserving of the label "knowledge,"[xv] which should only be applied to knowledge that is context-free, timeless, and general. "Prudence" itself often refers to the prudent *application* of knowledge—again, "discovered" outside of a given practice. Contra rationalist approaches, however, *phronēsis* considers both ends and means in its deliberations. Unlike scientific knowledge, it is not characterized by the putting *into* practice of knowledge derived outside of it. Whereas unlike technical knowledge, it does not deal in making a new object or world come into being. Instead, *phronēsis* is prudent action *in* a world already constituted—taking the world as the policy-maker finds it.

Although it is necessary to make these disciplinary observations, it would be unwise to discount the "real world" influences on the re-emergence of *phronēsis*: the shadow of Iraq is long here. How did the neo-conservatives get away with such a clearly unprudent foreign policy?[xvi] Let us now turn to examples of *phronēsis* in action.

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Phronetic Foreign Policy: Some (Potential) Examples

The first example is the most obvious and easily defended: the Cuban Missile Crisis.[xvii] The salient decision here is J.F.K.'s imposition of a blockade, coupled with a clear threat to use force should the Soviets fail to comply, rather than that of an aerial bombardment to force a withdrawal of the nuclear missiles. The key point in terms of the decision's phronetic qualities are the admixture of restraint, compromise, and determination. Kennedy acted with wise restraint, the use of force being rejected as he skilfully put the Third World War ball back into the Soviet Premier's court—making him take the decision to start hostilities if it should come to it. In this the President had to withstand significant pressure from inside the Executive Committee to strike militarily. Bobby Kennedy also deftly organized an arrangement whereby American Jupiter missiles stationed in Turkey—obsolete in any case—would be removed in return for a commitment not to invade Cuba. However, Kennedy, in close consultation with his brother, showed resolve to reverse Kruschev's gamble. This helps clarify that *phronēsis* in international affairs need not therefore equate to passivity. Air-strikes were not only contemplated but actively planned for.[xviii] Contra scholars like Jutta Weldes, who has shown that this threat was socially constructed and not inevitable, a strong response was the prudent thing to do in the circumstances.[xix]

A second example is also drawn from the history of American foreign relations:[xx] the Suez episode of 1956, when the Eisenhower administration sided with Egypt over its allies of Britain, France, and Israel in a militarized dispute over control of the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company. The story is well-known, and need not be rehashed.[xxi] The case for viewing American policy over Suez as an instance of *phronēsis* rests principally on the ethical dimension of Eisenhower's decision: Ike chose international principles over alliances—primarily the US-UK "special relationship"—and domestic political concerns—he was seeking re-election and was worried about a potential loss of support from Jewish voters.[xxii] Ike was helped to resist these pressures by British and French duplicity and political ineptitude in concocting a plan to "intervene" between Israel and Egypt to separate the combatants and remove the "threat" to the Suez Canal—even though the Israeli troops never even appeared to threaten the Canal itself. British and French actions were also clearly inappropriate in 1956. As Secretary Humphrey told members of Eisenhower's cabinet, "it looked as though [the British] were simply trying to reverse the trend away from colonialism, and to turn the clock back fifty years"[xxiii]; this was no longer the 19th century—gunboat diplomacy no longer flew. However discomforting Nasser's action was, recourse to military means would only have been justified had he engaged in further provocative actions—such as closing the Canal to European nations. This Nasser was careful not to do.

Also of interest in the cases of Suez and Cuba is the relationship between historical knowledge and prudent action—again, historical knowing being relegated to non-knowledge by neo-positivism. Kennedy learnt from the Bay of Pigs fiasco of April 1961 that CIA intelligence estimates and the wishes of his military advisors had to be taken with a large grain of salt. In that case, historical knowing meant doing something differently the next time. Eisenhower, by contrast, resisted the perennial historical "lesson" of not appeasing dictators. During a meeting of US policy-makers on 31 July, for example, "Mr. Allen Dulles said that British comment is full of reference to Hitler's occupation of the Rhineland." As the record shows, the argument had no traction in Washington.[xxiv] *Phronēsis* is not therefore about the "application" of historical knowledge, just as it is not the application of any knowledge "gained" outside of action itself—whether it be a skill à la technical knowledge or scientific "truth." Knowing and doing, like theory and practice, are false alternatives. *Phronēsis* is doing the right thing in the right way in the correct (historical) context, where recognizing that context is a facet of *phronēsis*.

The final example is the American-led intervention in Kosovo in 1999. The case for considering this phronetic is more difficult to make. Criticisms of Operation Allied Force have been powerful:[xxv] with a lower ceiling of 15000 feet for allied planes, the potential for collateral damage—including the Chinese embassy—was greatly enlarged; by circumventing the UN Security Council, a precedent was set which would later be repeated in the case of Iraq; finally, Kosovo was not a clear re-run of Bosnia. Yet, what is worth stressing about the Kosovo case is the *timeliness* or thickly contextual nature of the action initiated by Clinton and Blair. As such, it reminds us of the fact that *phronēsis* is a form of action *in the world* as it is. Critics of the Kosovo intervention then have justified points, but within the context of the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, preventing further bloodshed was a prudent and necessary response. In short, given that there was no going back to a time before Bosnia, Clinton and co. did what needed to be done.

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Conclusion: Phronēsis in Theory and Practice

What I have hoped to do here is to introduce *phronēsis* to readers unfamiliar with the concept and to draw out some (potential) historical instances of phronetic foreign policy. I do so humbly in the knowledge that some may disagree with my choices, and in the desire to stimulate a debate on what actually counts as *phronēsis* in world politics. Beyond that, my main claim is that the recovery of *phronēsis* has been driven by methodological concerns within Political Science. We can hence expect its popularity to wax and wane with its resonance within those debates. It is unlikely that the term will become common parlance, or that prudence will shed the connotations with atheoretical "horse sense"[xxvi] or mere pacificity. We must be careful to not to hope for too much from it since notwithstanding its distinguished heritage it is not an unproblematic philosopher's stone. What we can hope is that the recovery of *phronēsis* might help clarify what is really at stake in recent discussions about IR's policy relevance, and the role of IR theory in international political practice.

In that regard, what is crucial is that *phronēsis* is a form of knowing characteristic of the prudent policy-maker: the *phronimos.* Clausewitz's "genius" general is a good example here: he (sic) recognizes what to do in the fog of war not by applying knowledge gained outside the battle in question, but by employing vision made clear through experience and deep historical study.[xxvii] Again, the importance of non-scientistic modes of study is important here, but of more importance is the point that *phronēsis* is not of the academy, but of the political world. The key question, therefore, is not how IR scholars can "produce" *phronēsis* but how we can—*alongside other international political knowledge producers*—help foster it. Here we come to the importance of pluralism: that *phronēsis* is more likely to be fostered by different ways of looking at the world, each seeking their own forms of truth, rather than one form of knowledge "winning out" against all others.[xxviii] But again, pluralism is to be understood both in terms of a productive dialogue between different theoretical approaches within IR, but also structurally, in terms of how those various producers of knowledge—academic disciplines, think tanks, religions, and political groups—interact with one another. The aim is to nurture prudent policy-makers, and the spaces within which they can act phronetically, and that means having a multitude of intellectual resources to draw on in the discursive context within which they find themselves.

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[i] E.g. Brown 2012a; McCourt 2012; Shapcott 2001.

[ii] Zakaria 2008.

[iii] Jackson 2011.

[iv] Aristotle 1953. I will pass over the question of the relationship between the *Eudemian* and the *Nichomachean Ethics.* For those interested, see the Anthony Kenny's introduction in Aristotle 2011.

[v] See MacIntyre 2007 [1981].

[vi] See Kratochwil 1989.

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[vii] This a necessarily brief description of *phronēsis*. For a fuller treatment in the context of IR, see Shapcott 2001. Gadamer's discussion in *Truth and Method* is also indispensable. See Gadamer 1975 and Bernstein 1983.

[viii] Again, it is important to tread carefully here, as this hegemony consists of both statistical methods and game-theoretic approaches that are in fact quite far apart methodologically and epistemologically. See Jackson 2011.

[ix] E.g. constructivism, Marxism, and critical approaches. As so labelled by Robert Keohane. See Keohane 1988. These approaches are largely absent in US IR and its most prestigious publication outlets. See Maliniak et. al. 2011.

[x] A series of exchanges beginning in 2000 among disaffected scholars seeking to defend work that does not seek the context-free, general and abstract knowledge of rational choice/game theory/large-N approaches. See Monroe 2005 and Schram 2006. These were inspired by Bent Flyvbjerg's *Making Social Science Matter*. See Flybjerg 2001.

[xi] The reader will hopefully require little introduction to these movements; suffice it to say, the second debate that many thought was over by the 1970s has re-emerged since the 1990s with renewed force—if it ever really went away. See respectively, and necessarily unexhaustively, McCourt 2012; Checkel 1998; Nexon 2009; Bleiker 2001.

[xii] See Knorr and Rosenau 1969. On its re-invigoration, see Kratochwil 2006; Curtis and Koivisto 2010.

[xiii] For an explicit attempt to characterize Hedley Bull's "classical approach" as *phronēsis*, see Shapcott 2004.

[xiv] We can see here then the close relationship between the recovery of *phronēsis* and the "practice" and "pragmatic" turns. See, Adler and Pouliot 2011; Pouliot 2011; Owen 2002; Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009; Bauer and Brighi 2008. They stress the way in which a romanticized view of scientific knowledge formation has bewitched students of the social sciences, promising "certain" knowledge with sure foundations. On the issue of "foundations" in IR theory, see Brown 1994, and the special issue of *International Theory*, 1:3, 2009.

[xv] Dewey 1929.

[xvi] The turn to *phronēsis* then has a similar rationale to the re-emergence of classical realism in IR theory, where an approach once overtaken has been rehabilitated since it seems to speak with prescience to contemporary concerns. See Brown 2012a and 2012b.

[xvii] See Fursenko and Naftali 1998.

[xviii] See the minutes of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. Available at

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/msc_cubamenu.asp, last accessed 12 November 2012.

[xix] Weldes 1999.

[xx] A bias conditioned my own research interests, for which I can only beg forgiveness. I hope these examples are nonetheless illuminating enough for readers with interests in the foreign policies of different states.

[xxi] See Kyle 1991; Lucas 1996 and 1991.

[xxii] Nichols 2011.

[xxiii] Ibid.

[xxiv] See the discussions in *FRUS* Vol. XVI, Doc. 34 – Memorandum of a Conference with the President, at the White House, July 31, 9.45am, where "numerous differences were cited."

[xxv] See e.g. Chandler 2002.

[xxvi] Mercado 2009.

[xxvii] See Sumida 2001.

[xxviii] The elephant in the room being, of course, economics and its cousin of rational choice theory. See Amadae 2003; Mudge and Vauchez 2012.

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