Phronesis as Professional Knowledge
Practical Wisdom in the Professions

Elizabeth Anne Kinsella
University of Western Ontario, Canada

and

Allan Pitman (Eds.)
University of Western Ontario, Canada

Phronesis is the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom. In this collected series, phronesis is explored as an alternate way of considering professional knowledge. In the present context dominated by technical rationalities and instrumentalist approaches, a re-examination of the concept of phronesis offers a fundamental re-visioning of the educational aims in professional schools and continuing professional education programs.

This book originated from a conversation amongst an interdisciplinary group of scholars from education, health, philosophy, and sociology, who share concerns that something of fundamental importance – of moral significance – is missing from the vision of what it means to be a professional. The contributors consider the ways in which phronesis offers a generative possibility for reconsidering the professional knowledge of practitioners. The question at the centre of this inquiry is: “If we take phronesis seriously as an organising framework for professional knowledge, what are the implications for professional education and practice?”

A multiplicity of understandings emerge as to what is meant by phronesis and how it might be reinterpreted, understood, applied, and extended in a world radically different to that of the progenitor of the term, Aristotle. For those concerned with professional life this is a conversation not to be missed.

Phronesis as Professional Knowledge: Practical Wisdom in the Professions
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND EDUCATION:
A Diversity of Voices
Volume 1

Series Editor
Allan Pitman
University of Western Ontario

*Professional Practice and Education* aims to provide a forum for perspectives of our understanding of the nature of professional practice and the consequences flowing for education in the professions. It is the intention of the Editor that a platform will be provided for contributors from diverse cultural backgrounds, so that, on a global level, the nature of professions and their cultural/historical positioning might be problematised and re-examined.
PHRONESIS AS PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE:
PRACTICAL WISDOM IN THE PROFESSIONS

Edited by

Elizabeth Anne Kinsella
Allan Pitman
The University of Western Ontario
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vii

1. Engaging phronesis in professional practice and education
   *Elizabth Anne Kinsella and Allan Pitman* 1

2. Practical rationality and a recovery of Aristotle’s ‘phronesis’ for the professions
   *Frederick S. Ellett, Jr.* 13

3. Practitioner reflection and judgement as phronesis: A continuum of reflection and considerations for phronetic judgement
   *Elizabeth Anne Kinsella* 35

4. Reflective healthcare practice: Claims, phronesis and dialogue
   *Arthur W. Frank* 53

5. Cultivating capacity: Phronesis, learning, and diversity in professional education
   *Kathryn Hibbert* 61

6. Realising practical wisdom from the pursuit of wise practice
   *Joy Higgs* 73

7. Phronesis, aporia, and qualitative research
   *Rob Macklin and Gail Whiteford* 87

8. Phronesis and the practice of science
   *Farrukh Chishtie* 101

9. Reclaiming competence for professional phronesis
   *Derek Sellman* 115

10. Professionalism and professionalisation: Hostile ground for growing phronesis?
    *Allan Pitman* 131

11. Phronēsis, experience, and the primacy of praxis
    *Stephen Kemmis* 147

12. Phronesis as professional knowledge: Implications for education and practice
    *Elizabeth Anne Kinsella and Allan Pitman* 163

Notes on the contributors 173
Index 175
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This book originated from a continuing conversation in which we voiced concern (bordering on distress) regarding the instrumentalist values that permeate (often without question) our professional schools, professional practices, and policy decisions. Like others, we were grappling with a sense that something of fundamental importance—of moral significance—was missing in the vision of what it means to be a professional, and in the ensuing educational aims in professional schools and continuing professional education.

We are not alone in this concern; numerous social theorists have pointed out that, for more than two centuries, value-rationality has increasingly given way to instrumentalist rationality (Bourdieu, 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Ralston Saul, 1993; Sandywell, 1996; Schön, 1983, 1987). What then are the implications of this trend for professional education and practice? And, what if anything can be done? We wondered whether, at the heart of the issue, might lie significant issues concerning how we conceive of knowledge in the professions. We questioned whether some corrective might be possible, whether something of importance might be recovered, perhaps through Aristotle and his conception of phronesis or practical wisdom.

Numerous scholars have called for renewed attention to phronesis through various means, such as a reinvigoration of the concept within the professions; a reconceptualisation of professional knowledge that draws on phronesis; and even a reconceptualisation of social science itself (see, for example, Dumne, 1993, 1999; Eikeland, 2006, 2008; Flaming, 2001; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Frank, 2004; Gadamer, 1980, 1996; Kingwell, 2002; Maclntyre, 1982; Montgomery, 2006; Nussbaum, 2001; Polkinghorne, 2004; Schön, 1983, 1987; Smith, 1999; Stout, 1988; Taylor, 1999; Vanier, 2001).

Consideration of these challenges led to the question at the centre of this inquiry: “If we take phronesis seriously as an organising framework for professional knowledge, what are the implications for professional education and practice?”

We took the opportunity to invite a diverse group of interdisciplinary scholars to meet to discuss and debate this question and to formalise their responses in the chapters that comprise this book. Their responses open a multiplicity of understandings as to what is meant by phronesis and how it might be reinterpreted, understood, applied, and extended in a world radically different to that of the progenitor of the term, Aristotle.

E.A. Kinsella, A. Pitman (eds.), Phronesis as Professional Knowledge: Practical Wisdom in the Professions, 1–11. © 2012 Sense Publishers. All rights reserved.
But what is phronesis? Phronesis (phronēsis) is generally defined as practical wisdom or knowledge of the proper ends of life. In Aristotle’s scheme, phronesis is classified as one of several ‘intellectual virtues’ or ‘excellences of mind’ (Eikeland, 2008). Aristotle (trans. 1975) distinguished phronesis from the two other intellectual virtues of episteme and techne. In Aristotle’s conception, drawn below from Flyvbjerg (2001), episteme is characterised as scientific, universal, invariable, context-independent knowledge. The original concept is known today through the terms epistemology and epistemic. Techne is characterised as context-dependent, pragmatic, variable, craft knowledge and is oriented toward practical instrumental rationality governed by a conscious goal. The original concept appears today in terms such as technique, technical, and technology. Phronesis, on the other hand, is an intellectual virtue that implies ethics. It involves deliberation that is based on values, concerned with practical judgement and informed by reflection. It is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, and oriented toward action.

Through the process of developing this book, we have discovered that phronesis is a slippery concept, much more so than we had first anticipated. Rather than offering a neat corrective to instrumentalist rationality, the dialogues in these pages open a range of exciting conversations. This book does not present a tidy interpretation of phronesis. Rather, through the voices of the contributors, a diaspora of meanings is laid open. This is not to say that there are not commonalities between the ideas advanced: rather, the complexity of the search for an understanding of those forms of knowledge that are brought to, and are part of, professional practice has become clearer. The juxtaposition of chapters in this collection opens a space for dialogue and for the expression of divergent perspectives. We found ourselves wondering whether the classic epistemological metaphor of the blind men grasping at pieces of the elephant was inadequate: perhaps we are dealing with multiple elephants!

What has emerged is a constellation of ideas that have a common concern related to the nature of professional knowledge. In particular, the concern focuses on what is missing from the official discourse: the practical disjuncture between the knowledge required for practice and professional schools’ current conceptions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Stephen Kemmis refers to this disjuncture as a “negative space”—“a longing for something else” that is not currently present (Kemmis, chapter 11, p. 157). The professions are plagued with a theory–practice gap, which seems to be at the centre of this discontent. Our task was to explore the possibilities of a positive space that could respond to this void. Each of the chapters in this collection responds in one way or another to this space, by considering the ways in which phronesis might (or might not) offer a generative possibility for reconsidering the professional knowledge of practitioners.

PHRONESIS IN CONTEMPORARY PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: EMERGING THREADS AND JUXTAPOSITIONS

We do not live in Aristotle’s world. Gadamer explained the problem of historicity and interpretation well when he pointed out that we cannot fully understand the critique of a 19th-century critic of Shakespeare, let alone see what Shakespeare
ENGAGING PHRONESIS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

saw. Similarly, we cannot see the world as Aristotle saw it. At the core of this book is the recognition of the tensions inherent in any project that considers Aristotle’s ideas in a world vastly different from his.

The book opens with Fred Ellett’s consideration of this topic in some depth. Ellett asks what might legitimately be recovered from Aristotle’s thought, what must be unequivocally rejected, and what might be modified for contemporary times.

Aristotle lived in a world comprised of freemen and slaves. Races were deemed superior or inferior. Men and women were seen to have intrinsically different capacities that precluded women from involvement in serious intellectual work. The world was viewed as stable and eternal. The object of the intellect was to gain knowledge and, through knowledge, wisdom (sophia) and to develop a love for knowledge (philos). Hence, philosophy was the pursuit of the elite: the object was a society ruled by the wise ‘philosopher king.’ In current times, while we may wish for wise, thinking political leaders, we do so in a fundamentally different social and philosophical world. In this world, in which theoretical work has been differentiated from the practical and technical, and a post-enlightenment framing of science dominates our world view, new understandings of the tentative nature of our law-like claims call into question, for example, the eternal verity of Aristotle’s episteme.

In addition, the social constructions surrounding class, ethnicity, and gender with which we live differ vastly from those taken into consideration in the Athens of Aristotle. This difference has implications for thinking about professional practice in respect to the teleology of ‘the good’ and of ‘doing the good,’ as well as for assumptions about what that might mean, about who can take part in the practice, and for whom such practice is intended. The concern here is on two levels: one in which the focus is on phronesis as it relates to professional practice and its practitioners, the other on those engaged in meta-discussions about phronesis itself. Recognition of the social constructions surrounding class, ethnicity, and gender is, it would appear, key to any reconstitution of the notion of phronesis. Indeed, the whole understanding of what is ‘the good’—the teleological objective of the whole exercise—must be reconsidered in light of the different positions and the situatedness of those engaged in professional practices.

What cannot be recovered, as Ellett makes clear, is a moral essentialism of humankind’s nature, purpose, and function, or a first philosophy that is fixed, timeless, and universally necessary. The naturalness of sexism, classism, and racism is emphatically rejected. We are then talking about an Aristotelian conception of knowledge in a world that Aristotle would scarcely recognise. What, then can be recovered and what must be added to a conception that holds relevance for contemporary times? Ellett argues that four aspects are recoverable in that: (a) phronesis typically involves judgement that is deliberative, typically indeterminate but not calculative; (b) phronesis is a virtue; (c) phronesis typically is an embodied social practice that has internal goods and excellences; and (d) phronesis typically involves complicated interactions between the general and practical. Ellett rejects (a) Aristotle’s metaphysical biology; (b) Aristotle’s first philosophy; and (c) recent ‘Grand’ claims for practical rationality. Finally, he argues, given the centrality of probability in current conceptions of theoretical reason and practical rationality,
that future conceptions of phronesis, should be ‘worked together’ with the concept of probability.

Phronesis, or the quest for practical wisdom, implies reflection, but what might processes of reflection oriented toward phronesis look like in professional practice? These are questions tackled in various ways by many of the authors in this book (Arthur Frank, Kathy Hibbert, Joy Higgs, Rob Macklin and Gail Whiteford, Derek Sellman, and Stephen Kemmis), but most directly, as a centre point of focus by Elizabeth Anne Kinsella.

In thinking about how practitioners might enact phronesis, Kinsella contends that attention to reflection and judgement is key. Informed by the seminal reflective practice work of Donald Schön, Kinsella’s work offers an extension. Kinsella proposes a continuum of reflection that informs professional action from (a) receptive or phenomenological reflection, to (b) intentional cognitive reflection, to (c) embodied or tacit reflection, to (d) critical reflexivity. Her analysis acknowledges that reflection can take many forms: it can be deep, interior, emotional, and introspective; it can be intentional and based in reason; it may also be tacit, embodied, and revealed in intelligent action; and, further, it may be used to critically interrogate assumptions about taken-for-granted understandings in professional life.

Kinsella contends that the work of Schön provides a basis for an elaboration of thinking about the ways in which practitioners use reflection to make judgements and to inform action. She considers six criteria that might be seen as useful in orientating practitioners toward phronetic or wise judgement in professional practice: pragmatic usefulness, persuasiveness, aesthetic appeal, ethical considerations, transformative potential, and dialogic intersubjectivity.

Arthur Frank presents a case for practical wisdom to be discovered in reflective health care practice. His writing shows the power of narrative as a means of reflection and as a means of revealing what phronesis looks like in practice. Frank’s writing calls for practitioners “to reflect enough that maybe, eventually, a kind of practical wisdom will develop that can never be fully articulated ... but is felt as a guiding force” (Frank, chapter 4, p. 57). This kind of practical wisdom, according to Frank, is phronesis. His writing moves beyond a linear articulation of what phronesis might be, to capture something more, to actually reveal the aesthetic texture of what phronesis looks like.

Frank points out that in health care, practitioners have two choices: to “look at the day as a big checklist and don’t look back or even around ... as a way of getting through their day” (Frank, p. 57), or to engage in reflection. He draws attention to how, in professional practice, reflection often begins with interruption: “Reflection interrupts that flow. It is a carved-out space in which we ask ourselves what we’re doing, and who is doing the things that seem to be getting done” (Frank, p. 54). Frank notes multiple claims on the health care practitioner, of which he names six: Practical claims address the expectation of an outcome from the consultation; professional claims that the practitioner will meet the expectations of peers, both institutionally and personally; scientific claims call on practitioners to act according to the science on which their practice is based, or to “have very good
reasons for any deviation” (Frank, p. 56); commercial claims act on practitioners as employees, as investors and/or as owners of practices; ethical claims concern standards of practice, respect of patients, etc.; and moral claims call practitioners to moral actions, for example, witnessing the patient’s suffering. A procedural checklist, he suggests, does little to address these claims; but it does (if set down as a protocol) diminish the responsibility of the practitioner, under the guise of accountability. Arthur Frank calls for a phronesis that involves relationship and a call to witness the patient’s suffering. His preoccupation with the practitioner as ‘witness’ and his call to practitioners to respond to patients in the face of their suffering illuminate a relational emphasis in his practical wisdom.

Kathy Hibbert also takes up themes of reflection, narrative, and action, to consider what phronesis might offer our thinking about learning and diversity in professional education. Like others, her interest in phronesis began with her concerns about the increasingly instrumentalised contexts of professional practice. Hibbert offers a narrative of an experience that has “haunted” her and fuelled her interest in this area of scholarship: an era of “professional practice” where educators “disseminate materials” and “reproduce … received training,” where “information was scripted and delivered in a top-down system” (Hibbert, chapter 5, p. 62). About her own experience as a teaching consultant, she writes, “I recall feeling that this process of ‘training’ represented the direct opposite of everything I know about good teaching, and it led to a sense of deprofessionalisation and demoralisation” (Hibbert, p. 62), a disheartening digression from a vision of practice that engages practitioners as “professionals and intellectuals” (Hibbert, p. 62).

Like Frank, Hibbert points out that reflection often begins in the disruption of routinised experiences. She argues that routinised experiences can be dangerous and that scrutinising one’s actions in practice can influence future actions and decisions oriented toward phronesis. In particular, Hibbert considers how we might cultivate the capacity for phronetic action, drawing on Dewey to argue that phronetic action involves a whole-hearted and open-minded willingness to assume responsibility for one’s actions. She agrees with Joseph Dunne’s (1993) claim that “phronetic action can’t exist without both intellectual and moral conditions of the mind” (p. 264). This theme linking reflection to moral action and its relationship to phronesis continue to weave explicitly and implicitly throughout the book.

Joy Higgs also draws on the power of narrative and Socratic dialogue to reflect, through story, on the nature of phronesis. It has been said that we sometimes need fiction to reveal the truth. In Higgs’s fictional narrative of a dialogue between Veteratoris (the mentor) and Novitius (the initiate), phronesis is examined in the pursuit of wise practice and the generation of practical knowledge, which Higgs posits as an approach to balance the instrumentalist rationalities that hold ‘pride of place’ in professional practice.

Higgs observes that professional practice is characterised by the ‘absence of certainty.’ Recognition of the complexity and uncertainty of practice is a theme that permeates this book and is reminiscent of the classic metaphor of the swamp used by Schön to illuminate the nature of practice. Phronesis, it seems, is located in Schön’s swamp:
In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. (Schön, 1987, p. 3)

Higgs contends that practice is the precursor of knowledge. Practitioner observation, reflection, and experience bring together actions and ideas that are enacted in wise practice. For Higgs, wisdom is seen as “the ineluctable nexus between practice, judgement, and knowledge” (Higgs, chapter 6, p. 81); “the hallmark of a professional is the capacity to make sound judgements” (Higgs, p.79). In characterising practice knowledge, Higgs depicts it as the sum of the knowledges so used, including propositional as well as experiential knowledge: “Here episteme, techne, and phronesis dance together” (Higgs, p. 77).

Within the spectrum of professional practices, Rob Macklin and Gail Whiteford investigate phronesis and qualitative research, arguing that scientific reason is not an appropriate test for interpretively oriented qualitative research. They define scientific reason in a manner consistent with Aristotle’s classic conception of episteme and with taken-for-granted views about scientific reason—as informing impartial, universal, and generalisable knowledge that permeates our culture. Macklin and Whiteford argue that while scientific reasoning appropriately underpins quantitative research, a different form of rationality—practical rationality—is required to undertake and judge the practice of qualitative research. As such, they point out that the practice of qualitative research requires instruction in the practice of practical judgement and a quest for phronesis, as opposed to technical training and a focus on scientific rationality.

For Macklin and Whiteford, the dominance of the epistemology of science presents fundamental problems for qualitative researchers. The basis for their position is that the criteria for judging qualitative research are irreducibly different from those of quantitative work. They describe the task of recognition and justification of qualitative research within a culture of science as Herculean; however, it might also be cast as the impossible task of Sisyphus, doomed to spend eternity pushing a block of marble uphill, always to have it roll back down. They argue instead for practical rationality as a more appropriate means for making judgements about qualitative research.

Interestingly, a central theme in the work of Macklin and Whiteford, and in other chapters in this book, is the centrality of aporia—unresolvable dilemmas and uncertainties—as a characteristic of the work of professional practice. Embracing rather than avoiding aporias troubles assumptions about the quest for certainty and the use of episteme alone as the gold standard in professional practice. Professional practitioners draw on relevant epistemological knowledge, but the application of that knowledge calls for a quite different form of knowledge from that of episteme alone, one that embraces the messiness of practice. However, doing so is not to deny the central role of episteme in the practice of a profession (i.e., a physician cannot know what to do without a good grounding in the relevant sciences, and a teacher cannot teach without content knowledge) but rather to point out that
ENGAGING PHRONESIS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

attention to a different form of knowledge rooted in attention to aporia is also fruitful for effective practice.

There are particular assumptions about scientific reason, consistent with Aristotle’s conception, that permeate Macklin and Whiteford’s work. Interestingly, the work of philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1962) troubles conceptions of scientific reason and therefore of episteme, as impartial, universal, and generalisable. As pointed out by Farrukh Chishtie, scientific reason and the judgements that scientists make require a form of phronesis in and of itself. This tension about the lines between episteme and phronesis, in light of contemporary views of philosophy of science, is an interesting consideration opened up by the authors of this collection.

The nature of phronesis within the practice of science becomes a topic of great interest, explored by Chishtie in his consideration of what phronesis might mean in a post-Kuhnian world dominated by science. Kuhn’s (1962, 1977) view of epistemic values leads to a position whereby the knowledge that constitutes the episteme of a disciplinary community is seen to be legitimated through the exercise of judgement based upon agreed values: the epistemic values of the community. This view constitutes a radical repositioning of the role of judgement within conceptions of scientific knowledge. Not only is judgement exercised on a day-to-day basis by practitioners but it is also deeply implicated in the generation of the scientific theories and epistemic frameworks upon which professional practice itself is based. Chishtie argues that, as a consequence, phronesis becomes significant not only in individual practice but also to conceptions of episteme itself. In a Kuhnian view, episteme can no longer be unproblematically viewed as universal, context-independent knowledge. The distinctions between episteme and phronesis blur as our understanding of science is challenged. An implication of this, as pointed out by Flyvbjerg (2001) and Chishtie, is that power relations become significant insofar as they contribute to the formation of the episteme and the policing of its boundaries. In light of a Kuhnian view of science, the assumptions that the professions and their governing institutions hold regarding the nature of episteme, and the place of phronetic judgment in scientific practice, become topics for further consideration and investigation.

Derek Sellman reminds us that phronesis is Aristotle’s special virtue, one that straddles cognition and emotion, as well as intellect and character. Phronesis, closely related to wisdom, is the virtue that enables us to judge what it is we should do in any given situation. Sellman points out that the virtue of phronesis has a place in professional life distinguishable from its place in everyday life; he proposes the concept of professional phronimos—the professionally wise practitioner—as significant for conceptions of professional competence.

Sellman’s aim is to reclaim the term competence from those who have ‘commandeered’ it to describe skills-based learning. For Sellman, competence involves some form of emergent self-awareness or self-revelation. He argues that an expanded understanding of competence, one that includes phronesis, is necessary if practice is to be more than the mere routine application of technically derived protocols or algorithmic responses to the complex issues facing practitioners in
everyday work environments. According to this view, competence both encompasses those practitioners who transcend purely technical approaches to solving or resolving messy practice situations and begins to operate in ways that cannot be adequately described in technical rational terms.

Sellman also highlights the tensions between agency and structure in the quest for phronesis, a theme that resurfaces and is elaborated the chapter by Allan Pitman. In particular the dangers of calls for practitioners to develop phronesis in the absence of any recognition of the role of institutions in encouraging or discouraging such development in individual practitioners are of concern. If the structured constraints of practice are not recognized, practitioners may find themselves caught in an endless cycle of blame related to their incapacity to live according to the characteristics of the phronimos—the professionally wise practitioner.

This theme of the structured constraints of practice is elaborated by Allan Pitman in his consideration of the ‘hostile ground for growing phronesis’ in a time of excessive managerialism and accountability discourses in the professions. Pitman considers the challenges of enacting phronesis, including practical wisdom and professional judgement, in practice contexts in which professionals have numerous and frequently conflicting ruling bodies to which they are held accountable. Professional practice takes place in a social and political context, which is geographically and temporally located. Pitman highlights the situatedness of practice in its institutional and ideological contexts, in an age when discourses of accountability have enveloped professional work. He unpacks assumptions about professional knowledge in the teaching profession to examine the way in which the various accountability mechanisms create tensions for practitioners and potentially work against efforts toward phronesis.

Pitman points out that any concern that advocates for a phronetic characterisation of professional practice is located in a dominant discourse of professional practice. As the era of trust in the actions of practitioners has waned, and the financial commitments of governments have grown, so too have arisen discourses of accountability and managerialism, and systems of surveillance.

There is a paradox here, reflected in several chapters in this book, that as the mechanisms of professionalisation have been put in place, so too have the levels of prescription increased, thereby circumscribing the capacity of members to act autonomously in situations that demand the exercise of judgement. The ‘danger’ of calling for phronesis and holding practitioners accountable for practical wisdom in contexts that may not support it, and that may actively mitigate against it, is that practitioners may face a double bind, where they are blamed for a failure of agency at the personal level, when the issues may well be structural and systemic. This underlines the essential need to consider calls for phronesis in light of what Kemmis (2005) has called the extra-individual features of practice, including the social, cultural, material-economic, discursive, political, and policy dimensions.

Interestingly, Stephen Kemmis suggests that calls for phronesis might be seen as a response to a lack in the present thinking and discourse about professional practice; that is, a reaction to a disquiet about the realities in which professionals go about their work. He describes this lack as a ‘negative space’ and suggests that
phronesis might be seen as a placeholder for the ‘something more’ that we are looking for in our thinking about the practice of professionals.

Kemmis proposes that our longing for phronesis, for wisdom, is really a longing for something else—a longing for praxis. According to Kemmis, “Praxis is a particular kind of action. It is action that is morally committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field” (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 4; emphasis in original); “Praxis is the action itself, in all its materiality and with all its effects on and consequences for the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political dimensions of our world in its being and becoming. Praxis emerges in ‘sayings’, ‘doings’, and ‘relatings’” (Kemmis, p. 150).

Provocatively, Kemmis posits praxis as a prerequisite for phronesis and as the centrepiece of a morally committed practice. He suggests that it is the wrong way around to hope that if we develop phronesis in rising generations of practitioners, then praxis will follow. According to Kemmis, it is through experience and action—through praxis—that we develop phronesis; therefore, “it is the happening-ness of praxis that we must commit ourselves to if we want to learn or develop phronēsis” (Kemmis, p. 158). He suggests that phronesis as a virtue is “evident in the honour and nobility of persons who have committed themselves to praxis as a way of life” (Kemmis, p. 158).

This raises conceptual tensions worthy of considered attention. One might ask: What is the nature of the relationship between phronesis and praxis? Where does one end and the other begin? Does one precede the other? To what extent are they symbiotic? Is morally committed action enacted through praxis, phronesis, or both?

Perhaps at the heart of Kemmis’s challenge lie contesting ideas about various types of reflection, action, and moral commitment and the ways in which they are related to and enacted in professional life through phronesis, or praxis, or both. For instance, one might ask whether phronesis implies a kind of knowledge that exists ‘only in the heads’ of practitioners, a Cartesian kind of intentional reflection, separated from and followed by action; whereas, praxis implies a type of embodied reflection revealed through morally committed doings, sayings, and relating. Where exactly the conceptual lines in these two dimensions lie is subject to debate. In the context of professional practice, phronesis might be oriented slightly more toward morally committed thought, whereas praxis might be oriented slightly more toward morally committed action, but the lines between the two appear uncertain. It appears that both phronesis and praxis are desirable in morally committed practice. This raises issues concerning the various conceptions of both phronesis and praxis; ongoing work to tease out the lines of distinction and the overlap between the two concepts and the implications for professional practice is imperative. It is clear that the writers in this collection hold differing views about these conceptual lines, which have yet to be articulated in a definitive way. The boundaries are blurry!

Of further note, Kemmis draws attention not only to individual phronesis, that of the practitioner, but to collective phronesis, the collective good that a professional community commits itself to through its practice as a profession. This notion of collective phronesis, and the implications it opens up for how professions envision
and enact what they do, raises a new area worthy of discussion amongst the epistemic communities of the professions at large.

**CONCLUSION**

The contributors to this book speak individually and collectively about what a transformed understanding of phronesis might require. The earlier chapters in the book speak about what might be recovered from Aristotle’s phronesis and offer examples about what phronesis, or practical wisdom, might look like in contemporary practice—through reflection, professional judgement, phronetic action, narrative, dialogue, ethics, discernment, and relationship. The later chapters in the collection offer more critically oriented perspectives on taken-for-granted notions of phronesis, competence, and the relationship between phronesis, episteme, and praxis. In addition, the contributors discuss questions concerning the tensions between individual agency and the structures of professional practice and the potential constraints or ‘hostile ground’ for phronesis. Finally, the possibility that phronesis might be enacted in ways that extend beyond the individual, at a collective level, is considered.

Rather than offering closure on this topic, the chapters open a dialogue and point to many more questions than answers. We invite readers into this dialogue and confess that we find the chapters in this book far more interesting than we had first imagined: they are purveyors of far more tensions than they reconcile and are filled with the complexity and uncertainty that any practitioner oriented toward phronesis will acknowledge and embrace.

We acknowledge that it is important in this consideration not to give the impression that phronesis is privileged at the expense of either episteme or techne. We wish to be explicit in suggesting that we believe all three—episteme, techne, and phronesis—are required for professional practice. The crisis, as we see it, is that episteme and techne are privileged, and the diminishing of phronesis diminishes the work that professionals aspire to do.

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ENGAGING PHRONESIS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND EDUCATION


Elizabeth Anne Kinsella
Faculty of Health Sciences and
Faculty of Education
The University of Western Ontario

Allan Pitman
Faculty of Education
The University of Western Ontario
FREDERICK S. ELLETT, JR.

PRACTICAL RATIONALITY AND A RECOVERY OF ARISTOTLE’S ‘PHRONESIS’ FOR THE PROFESSIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Western philosophical tradition, customary practice has been to distinguish theoretical reason, which is concerned to determine what one should believe, from practical reason (or practical rationality), where practical rationality is concerned to determine how one should act. In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in Aristotle’s conception of practical rationality, or ‘phronesis.’ My main task here is to explicate some of the important roles such a (recovered) concept can and should usefully play in the professions. To achieve this task, I begin by briefly characterising the concept of ‘profession.’ I then briefly set out what can and should be legitimately recovered from Aristotle’s conception, what cannot be legitimately recovered, and what modifications must reasonably be made to develop a viable conception of practical rationality for the professions. I suggest that ‘practical rationality’ is best seen as a placeholder term concerned with our being responsible in deciding what to do. Finally, I illustrate how ‘phronesis’ can and should play a central and important part in professional teaching in Ontario.

II. ON BEING A PROFESSION

I begin by briefly setting out a plausible understanding of what we might, for our purposes here, usefully consider a profession to be. Here I draw freely from the Pitman and Ellett (2008) essay, “Professionalism: Its ambiguity in the current [educational] reforms in Ontario.” Many of the ideas expressed in the essay have built upon earlier educational works by McPeck and Sanders (1974), Carr and Kemmis (1989), and the early work by Lee Shulman (1987/2004a). After their review of the literature, McPeck and Sanders (1974) plausibly argued that a profession has four ‘requirements’ (my emphases):

1. that there exists a specialized literature which forms an intellectual basis for practice;
2. that the occupational group provides a needed social [or public] service as its raison d’être;
3. that there exists a set of standards designed to ensure, or certify, minimal competence in membership in the group;
4. that there exists a broad range of autonomy both for the individual and for the occupational group to practice according to its own judgment. (p. 64)
So, then, these requirements state that the occupational group governs itself in important ways (by deliberating and setting its own ethical and competence standards and its own guidelines for certification and suspension, or expulsion) and that each individual member has autonomy of judgement built upon the bodies of specialised literature (knowledge or understandings) within the space set up by the group’s ethical codes and guidelines.

Although McPeck and Sanders (1974) held that there must exist “a specialized literature which forms an intellectual basis for practice” (p. 64), they did very little to explicate or codify what the ‘literature’ might be for education. Here, Lee Shulman’s work can be seen as adding to and drawing out the basic conceptual points for being a professional teacher. Shulman (1987/2004a) was responding in large part to calls for serious, educational reforms in the United States, calls made in the early 1980s about the ‘nation’s being at risk’; he helped lead the way in arguing that, in all these reforms, teachers should be seen as professionals. And he recognised that if one were to see teaching as a profession, then one would need to articulate the ‘intellectual basis for practice,’ which are the forms of knowledge unique to teaching. Shulman defended several claims. First, he argued (1987/2004a, p. 227) that a good teacher has “pedagogical content knowledge,” which is a special amalgam of subject-matter content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. It is the pedagogical content knowledge that is uniquely the province of teachers. Second, he argued (1987/2004a, pp. 232–233) that one of the sources of (legitimate) knowledge comes from the “wisdom of the practice” itself. Although Shulman did not embrace ‘action research’ in the manner of Carr and Kemmis (1989), he would surely agree with Carr and Kemmis that one of the major sources of ‘best practice’ is to be found in the ongoing activities (work) of good teachers. Shulman helped lead efforts to study how ‘novice’ teachers become ‘masterful’ (or highly competent) teachers. Finally, and most important for our purposes here, he argued (1987/2004a, pp. 233–241) that typical cases of teacher activities involve pedagogical thinking (and reasoning), which should be seen as a kind of practical rationality. Although Shulman’s theorising was basically correct in placing a kind of practical rationality at the centre of being a professional teacher, I argue that his views can be significantly enhanced and expanded by incorporating a conception of ‘phronesis.’

III. A RECOVERY OF PRACTICAL RATIONALITY AS ‘PHRONESIS’

Let me now turn to see what can and should be legitimately recovered from the conception of ‘phronesis’ set out by Aristotle, what cannot be legitimately recovered, and what modifications need to made to the conception. I argue that one can (and should) legitimately recover four aspects: (1) Phronesis typically involves judgement (which is deliberative, typically indeterminate, but not calculative); (2) Phronesis typically is a virtue; (3) Phronesis typically is an embodied social practice, which has internal goods and excellences; (4) Phronesis typically involves complicated interactions between what is general and what is practical. I argue that one should legitimately reject (1) Aristotle’s metaphysical biology; (2) Aristotle’s
First Philosophy; and (3) (the more recent) ‘Grand’ claims for practical rationality. Finally, I argue that the conception needs to be modified in major ways to make room for our (much more recent) conception of probability. (So central is probability to our deciding what to do today that some have called probability ‘the guide to life.’) I also suggest that ‘practical rationality’ is an open concept, which can and should function as a placeholder term concerned with our being responsible in deciding how we should act.

Before I begin my account of the ‘recovery’ and ‘modifications’ of ‘phronesis,’ let me make two brief remarks. First, please note that interpreting Aristotle is problematic so my remarks should be suitably tentative. Second, as I have noted earlier, customary practice has been to distinguish ‘theoretical reason,’ which is concerned to determine what one should believe, from ‘practical reason’ (or practical rationality), which is concerned to determine how one should act.

Still, let me caution the reader that almost all of the key terms have been used by different thinkers in different ways to talk about the same phenomenon: determining how one is to act. For example, when speaking about ‘practical rationality,’ Jeffrey Stout (1990) used the quite common ‘translation’ term, practical wisdom; when analysing the concept, Max Black (1972) used the term reasonableness; and in his widely read works, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, 1988) used the term practical rationality. And though John Kekes recovers much from Aristotle’s views, Kekes (1989, 1995, 2002) used various terms to develop his positions. And one can plausibly argue that Dewey (1938/1997) used the terms freedom and self-control to refer to what others have called ‘practical wisdom.’ Thus, one needs to be patient in clarifying what is actually being recovered and being argued. The central topic of interest here involves a conception of determining how one should act.

Let us begin with a definition from one widely cited and authoritative source, D. D. Runes (1960):

Phronesis: practical wisdom, or knowledge of the proper ends of conduct and of the means of attaining them; distinguished by Aristotle from theoretical knowledge or science, and from technical skill. (p. 235)

Let us agree that for several thinkers, ‘phronesis’ is indeed the rational capacity (ability) concerned to ‘determine’ the proper end(s) of conduct and to determine the proper ends of one’s life. I hope it is obvious how determining the proper ends of one’s life has serious implications for the proper ends of one’s conduct (activities) and one’s means (actions) for achieving those ends. Black (1972), Kekes (1989, 1995, 2002), MacIntyre (1984, 1988), and Nussbaum (1986, 1990) are all concerned with the ultimate ends of a person’s life. For our purposes here, we have no reason to oppose their views on these ‘ultimate’ matters. But I suggest that for our considerations, we can and should restrict the term ‘phronesis’ to coincide with the range and scope of professional judgements. Every professional being is, of course, a person who has a life to live. And I do agree that (some version of) phronesis is indeed the reasoning capacity that ‘determines’ what are one’s proper ends of one’s life. I am thereby asserting that one can be a good professional and also be a good spouse, a good parent, or a good promoter of
world-class university rowing. For most professionals, then, being a good professional is a very important part of living a good life and a part of living a good life that holds serious implications for one’s self-identity and self-esteem. But being a good professional is usually only a part, though an important part, of making and living a good life. (I should note here that I think it plausible that most professionals can reliably pursue the goods and ends of their profession even if such activities do not further—and perhaps, even, to some degree, conflict with—their self-interest, a point to which I will return.) So, then, I suggest that for our considerations the term phronesis be suitably restricted to coincide with the range and scope of professional judgements.  

III.1 Recovering ‘Phronesis’: Deliberative Judgement (and Not a Calculation)  

As Runes’s (1960) definition correctly suggests, Aristotle broke with his teacher, Plato, in his holding (roughly) that the form of theoretical reason (or knowledge), which asks ‘what should one accept (or believe)?’ differs from the form of practical rationality, which asks ‘what should one do?’ and ‘how should one act?’ Aristotle held (roughly) that theoretical reason is governed primarily by the rules of (formal) deductive logic; but he held that practical rationality typically takes the form of a deliberation: the weighing of pros and cons. And by holding that phronesis is a form of deliberation (or judgement), the most plausible account, in my view, argues that phronesis is not a mathematical calculation of any kind (nor a kind of formal, logical argument)vi. (This view stands in contrast to the views of such thinkers as John Stuart Mill, 1863/2001.) Although deliberation can be said to involve ‘the weighing of pros and cons,’ the term weighing is used metaphorically. For example, Black (1972, pp. 56–57), who used the term reasonableness in his recovery of Aristotle’s conception, has explicitly argued both that such a deliberation (judgement) does not involve the ‘maximising’ of any quantity and that typically no determinate answer can be found to the question ‘what is the most reasonable way to act?’ (see also Sen, 1995, 2009). Black also argued that persons in the same situation may judge differently and yet both can be reasonable. (Here, thinkers such as Black, 1972, and Sen, 1995, 2009, have argued that the so-called ‘rational choice theory,’ which has been widely held in economics, is an inadequate model. They both see a more plausible model in Aristotle’s ‘phronesis.’ I side with Black and Sen.)

III.2 Recovering ‘Phronesis’: Practical Rationality as a Virtue (with Accompanying Virtues)  

As I have noted, some writers have set out to recover the key insights by using the term ‘practical wisdom.’ In a very good discussion of these matters, Stout (1990) has argued that we should see nurses (and doctors) as engaging in social practices where practical wisdom is one of the central virtues. This notion leads to the second major recovery from Aristotle. According to Plato, Socrates claimed that if an agent knew what the right action was, then the agent would indeed perform that
action; but both Plato and Aristotle rejected this Socratic claim. (Indeed, Aristotle held that a person could even do what one ‘knew’ to be wrong.) Thus, the Aristotelian tradition has a special place for the (quasi-moral) virtues, where a virtue is a disposition that enables one to perform the action that one judges to be (practically) reasonable. For Aristotle, then, quasi-moral virtues enable a person to judge reasonably (such as being committed to gathering relevant ‘evidence’), whereas moral virtues (such as courage and temperance) enable one to perform the reasonable action to achieve one’s ends.

In his *Ethics after Babel*, Stout (1990, p. 269) attempted a recovery of phronesis as ‘practical wisdom’ and argued that “medical care is a social practice in MacIntyre’s sense” (my emphasis), a social practice in which nurses and doctors should have the following virtues: practical wisdom (the ability to exercise sound medical judgement and discernment), justice (giving others their due), temperance, and courage. Stout also included the virtues of hope (the mean between despair and presumption), faith (trust in genuine authorities), and love of the good (properly ordered desire for goods internal to the practice, sought for their own sake) (p. 272). In advocating the virtue of ‘love,’ Stout implicitly rejected both motivational hedonism (which holds that agents are solely motivated by hedonic pleasure and pains) and rational egoism (which holds that agents are rational if and only if they seek their own interests). As noted earlier, I basically agree with Stout here. I think it plausible to hold that most professionals can reliably pursue the goods and ends of the profession, even if such activities do not further (and perhaps even conflict to some degree with) the agents’ self-interest. I think that one of the attractions of ‘phronesis,’ then, is its implicit rejection of motivational hedonism and rational egoism.

The upshot is that the second recovery of Aristotle’s ‘phronesis’ will see the professional as having not only the (cognitive) capacity to deliberate (judge) well but also the appropriate (affective) attitudes and dispositions (i.e., the virtues). Also notice that Stout’s discussion provides us with a good example of how the term ‘phronesis’ can legitimately be restricted to coincide with the range and scope of ‘professional’ judgements. Let us turn to the third recovery.

### III.3 Recovering ‘Phronesis’: Deliberative Judgement in Social Practice Embodied in Institutions

Whether the concept of ‘social practice’ should be regarded as properly Aristotelian or as mainly Alasdair MacIntyre’s recovery is a difficult question to answer. Whatever the case, MacIntyre’s conception of ‘social practice’ has influenced many thinkers (see, for example, Kekes, 1989, 1995, 2002; Stout, 1990). In his *After Virtue*, MacIntyre (1984) drew out the role of ‘internal goods’ in a social practice in the following way:

By a [social] practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity though which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of,
that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve [internal] excellence, and human conceptions of ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (p. 187, my emphasis)

MacIntyre (1984) went on to articulate the concept by saying that “arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life, all fall under the concept” (p. 188), whereas taking long showers, playing tic-tac-toe, bricklaying, and planting tulips do not fall under the concept. The internal goods (and excellences) of a social practice stand in contrast to the so-called external goods: money, status, prestige, and their accompanying power relations.

Of course, external goods are real goods (if only instrumental goods). Such external goods can be achieved in other ways or in ways that have little to do with achieving the excellences of the social practice (with achieving the internal goods of the practice). Although MacIntyre (1984) claimed that contemporary moral theorising tends to support the emotive theory, which holds that ethical (moral) statements are really just expressions of one’s emotions, MacIntyre’s conception of ‘social practice’ implicitly rejects both motivational hedonism and rational egoism. In other words, MacIntyre assumed it plausible to hold that most members of the social practice can reliably pursue the goods and ends of the social practice, even if such activities do not further (and perhaps even, to some degree, conflict with) the member’s self-interest. Again, I agree that MacIntyre’s position is a plausible assumption.

Furthermore, MacIntyre (1984) has argued that social practices are almost always embodied in institutions, which, according to MacIntyre, typically trade in external (to the social practice) goods: money, status, prestige, and their accompanying power relations. Stout (1990) applied MacIntyre’s conceptions to the social practice of medical care as follows:

Social practices are often embodied in institutions. In our [the U.S.] society, the practice of medical care is embodied in institutions such as professional associations, medical schools, partnerships, independent hospitals, and increasingly powerful commercial hospital chains. It is also closely related to broader institutions such as the capitalist market and governmental agencies. Without some sort of sustaining institutions, the practice would change dramatically for the worse, if not collapse altogether. (p. 274)

As both MacIntyre and Stout have noted, although the good side of this discussion is that such institutions do indeed help sustain the social practice, the bad side is that such institutions, since they trade in external goods, often seriously corrupt (or distort or disrupt) the achievement of the internal goods of the social practice.

Now, in Ontario, the duties and responsibilities of the elementary and secondary public school teachers are primarily set out in the province’s Education Act and the act’s Regulations. Furthermore, elementary and secondary public school teachers are also members of two different institutions: respectively, the Ontario College of Teachers and the Ontario Teachers’ Federation. Many see the Ontario College of
Teachers as having been set up explicitly to promote teaching as a profession, whereas the Ontario Teachers’ Federation is seen as being primarily concerned with wages, pensions, and other working conditions. Here, then, at least two important questions arise. How far (and in what ways) does the Ontario College of Teachers actually enable teachers to act professionally? How far (and in what ways) does the Ontario Teachers’ Federation conflict with (or undermine) teachers’ abilities to act professionally? (I shall return to these matters below in Section V.)

In Ontario, nursing is similarly related to two institutions, the College of Nurses and the Ontario Nursing Association.

III.4 Recovering ‘Phronesis’: Deliberative Judgements Involving Complex Interactions of the Generals and Particulars

Another of the well-known writers who have tried to recover the key ideas from the Aristotelian tradition is Martha Nussbaum. Many good yet short characterisations illustrate the complex ‘interactions’ between all the generals and the particulars involved when the agent is trying to decide (judge) the reasonable action to perform in a concrete situation. I hope you will find Martha Nussbaum’s characterisation to give a good sense of what is going on here. In trying to draw out the similarities between the views of Aristotle and the novelist Henry James, Nussbaum (1990) drew upon one character’s actions in the book by Henry James, The Golden Bowl. She wrote:

In ethical terms, what [the stories articulated imply] is that the perceiver [agent] brings to the new situation a history of general conceptions and commitments, and a host of past obligations and affiliations (some general, some particular), all of which contribute to and help to constitute her [the perceiver’s] evolving conceptions of good living [good acting].... Perception, we might say, is a process of loving conversation between rules and concrete responses, general conceptions and unique cases, in which the general articulates the particular and is in turn further articulated by it. The particular is constituted out of features of both repeatable and nonrepeatable; it is outlined by the structure of general terms, and so it contains the unique images of those we love. (pp. 94–95)

From this passage, I hope it is clear that Nussbaum held that using literature is a good way to sensitisze and initiate students (and professionals, too) into what is important in the moral realm. In favourably comparing Aristotle’s views with James’s depictions, Nussbaum also held that literature is a kind of moral philosophy. I believe that an adequate characterisation of good scientific judgements can be seen as typically deliberative judgements involving complex interactions of the generals and particulars (see Elgin, 1996; Hooker, 1995). I further maintain that an adequate characterisation of good professional judgements can be seen as typically deliberative judgements involving complex interactions of the generals and particulars.
Nussbaum plausibly shows noteworthy similarities between the ethical views of Aristotle and the ethical stances involved in Henry James’s depictions. For some reason, however, Nussbaum totally neglects to deal with one of the key features of Aristotle’s views. As we have seen above, many have given the following kind of definition (e.g., Runes, 1960, p. 235, my emphasis):

**Phronesis:** practical wisdom, or knowledge of the proper ends of conduct and of the means of attaining them; distinguished by Aristotle from theoretical knowledge or science, and from technical skill.

This definition is misleading in important ways, for it fails to make clear that, for Aristotle, the ultimate, proper end of the good life is determined by theoretical reason and not by practical reason. Furthermore, for Aristotle, theoretical reason holds that all things must have a form (and function), and that the form for humans enables the philosopher to show that the highest good for all humans is the contemplation of knowledge.

Aristotle’s position here is often called ‘moral essentialism’ (or ‘moral cognitivism’). This position has generated many critiques (an early refutation came from Kant.) Here, it is useful to note that MacIntyre himself rejected this position. Although MacIntyre (1984, 1988) has indeed argued that much of Aristotle can be recovered, he has provided good reasons for rejecting Aristotle’s moral essentialism. As MacIntyre (1984) summed it up, we must reject Aristotle’s ‘metaphysical biology,’ the position that holds that mankind has “an essential nature and an essential purpose or function” (p. 88). As Kekes (1995, 2002) argued in many of his works, deciding how one should live one’s life is as much a matter of making as finding. (The alternative position to essentialism is often called ‘moral pluralism.’) In my judgement, such thinkers as Dewey, Kant, Kekes, Margolis, MacIntyre, and Stout provide good reasons to reject the essentialist position. So, this discussion leads to our first rejection: the rejection of Aristotle’s moral essentialism.

MacIntyre (1988) unwittingly leads us to our second rejection. MacIntyre’s work, *After Virtue*, had set out to recover something like an Aristotelian conception of virtue, but he recognised he needed some account of rational inquiry. In his *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* MacIntyre (1988) set out to defeat the contemporary liberal political theories by advancing an account of practical rationality as socially and historically determined. MacIntyre (1988) put it this way: a number of analytic philosophers (primarily the American John Rawls) have held that rationality requires . . . that we first divest ourselves of allegiance to any one of the contending theories and abstract ourselves from all those particularities of social relationship . . . Only by so doing . . . shall we arrive at a genuinely neutral, impartial, and . . . universal point of view . . . . [This] conception of
ideal rationality as consisting of principles that a socially disembodied being would arrive at illegitimately ignores the inescapably historically and socially context-bound character which any substantive set of principles of rationality, whether theoretical or practical, is bound to have. (pp. 3–4)

In my judgement, MacIntyre’s account is indeed the (comparatively more) plausible account of theoretical and practical rationality, one that conceives of reason as some kind of power preformed by the social-historical context. Yet, even though MacIntyre defended the view that both theoretical and practical reason are in some ways ‘historical artifacts,’ he also tried to show that such a view of reason leads to a First Philosophy of the kind found in the Aristotelian-Thomistic moral tradition. Now a ‘First Philosophy’ is one that holds there must be fixed, timeless, and universally necessary ‘First Principles’ by which to guide one’s thoughts and actions.

But it is not a contradiction to hold that moral (and rational) inquiry has no such First Philosophy. And given that theoretical and practical rationality is pre-formed by the social-historical context, it is comparatively implausible that such a First Philosophy exists. Richard Bernstein (1971, 1983, 1993) is a thinker who has also argued that theoretical reason and practical rationality are best seen as historical artifacts. He, too, has argued that it is comparatively implausible that such a First Philosophy exists. And Bernstein (1993) has argued that MacIntyre’s position actually leads to an ‘objectivism’ (the position that in each domain there must exist a uniquely correct theory). In my judgement, Bernstein has provided another reason to hold that MacIntyre’s ‘recovery’ of a first philosophy cannot be legitimated. (In the moral realm, see the works of Margolis, 1996, 2004, and Sen, 2009.)

So far, I have been concerned with what we can and should legitimately recover from Aristotle’s conception of ‘phronesis.’ But a related and perhaps ‘wider’ conception of ‘practical rationality’ has played a key role in recent philosophical work on legitimating (liberal) principles of justice. This wider body of work comes primarily from Kant’s use of practical rationality, which is at the core of his ethical theory. As I noted above, Kant explicitly set out to reject Aristotle’s claim that all humans have a unique, ultimate end. He set out to reject this moral essentialism, arguing that we can live our lives in many reasonable ways; he was one of the first ‘pluralists’ to acknowledge ‘the crooked timbre of humanity’ (see Berlin, 1991).

Let me try to briefly summarise these recent inquiries. First, Kant himself set out to show that in moral matters all practically rational agents must be committed to the ‘categorical imperative.’ Kant gave several formulations of this (allegedly) necessary principle. Consider the formal formulation, the ‘formula of the universal law,’ which says “Act only in accordance with the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.” Now in the past three decades of Anglo-American philosophy, several good reasons have been given for holding that no formal account can use practical rationality to derive any interesting moral principles. In other words, there is no a priori defence of moral principles. (For a review of the literature, see Wood, 1999, chapter 3.)

The more recent philosophers really intend to avoid a priori approaches, and they also try to see practical rationality as some kind of socio-cultural artifact. One
of the most influential of these thinkers is Habermas, a late member of the Frankfurt School, which advanced views about rationality as being historical. Habermas's early work (1979) was built around the notion of an 'ideal speech situation,' which defined truth as what the community of inquirers would arrive at in the long run. Yet Quine (1960) had early on argued that such a (pragmatic) conception of truth could not be defended. And Geuss (1981) has more recently argued that if Habermas has been pursuing a transcendental approach, then that approach cannot succeed (see Nielsen, 1992).

In his more recent 'discourse ethics,' Habermas (1990) has tried to show that all rational agents are necessarily bound to such principles:

All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its [that is, every valid norm] general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone’s interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation). (pp. 65–66)

But Habermas’s attempts fail because they cannot overcome Berlin’s (1991) point that no matter what structure a society has, there is no society in which all good lives can be promoted and advanced.

In the United States, John Rawls (1970) had also hoped to find a unique set of principles of justice that were necessarily binding on all practically rational agents. But in Rawls’s later work (1993), he seems to admit that his original project (1970) cannot succeed. Rawls (1993) fails to deal with Berlin’s concern: even in a liberal society, there will always be individuals whose reasonable interests will not be fostered by a liberal society. In such a context, then, no hope is possible for even a limited consensus of practically rational agents. But Rawls and especially Habermas must face a more serious problem: how to derive the necessary moral principles (binding on all rational agents) if practical rationality is some kind of a socio-historical artifact. Rawls and Habermas have failed to address the deep implications of the question. In recent work, Sen (2009) has argued that even if Rawls’s search for a perfectly just society could succeed (which Sen doubts), this ideal would not help us make a society more just. Sen also argued that no conception of a perfectly just society is needed to make one’s society (or the world) more just. Sen’s work provides a plausible case for showing how theoretical reason and practical rationality (phronesis) can be useful in making a society more just, even if we can devise no conception of the ideally just society (see also Margolis, 1996, 2004.)

I have a second reason for discussing these recent attempts to develop a plausible theory of a just society using the concept of practical rationality. As I have noted earlier, the requirements (for being a professional) state both that the occupational group governs itself in important ways, by deliberating and setting its own ethical and competence standards and its own guidelines for certification and suspension (or expulsion), and that each individual member has autonomy of judgement built upon the bodies of specialised literature (knowledge or understandings) within the space set up by the group’s ethical codes and guidelines. John Rawls’s attempts to create the principles for a just society should
be recognised as attempts to create the legitimate principles for ‘collective choice’ in the society. A professional group also needs to create a set of legitimate principles for collective choice in the professional group. Although I judge the work by Margolis (1996, 2004) and Sen (1995, 2009) to be (comparatively more) plausible, much can be learned from the works of Rawls and Habermas about how to go about generating such legitimate principles to govern (justly) the group and its members. Here the group’s collective choices should, of course, concern how its own internal activities can be fair. And the members of the professional group also need to cooperate with other citizens, relevant experts, and politicians to help develop plans to meet the needs of its clients in a just manner (see Daniels, 1985).

III.7 Modifying Aristotle’s ‘Phronesis’: Incorporating ‘Probability’

One additional, major, modification needs to be made to Aristotle’s ‘phronesis’: it involves the concept of ‘probability.’ Today, many have argued that probability is the guide to life. The concept of probability is widely acknowledged to play major roles in theoretical reason (in both the content of major theories and in the statistical methods for testing theories) and in practical rationality (determining what to do when under risk and under uncertainty). Much has been written about these roles (for example, see Benn & Mortimore, 1976; Black, 1972; Chendiak, 1986; Elgin, 1996; Hooker, 1995; Moser, 1990; Sen, 1995, 2009). Thus, our use of ‘probability’ has ‘revised’ in major ways how we think about theorising and acting. But our conception of ‘probability’ came into being (emerged) in the mid-1600s, and it has since undergone several modifications (or revisions) (for an account, see Hacking, 1975). At any rate, whatever can and should be recovered from Aristotle’s ‘phronesis,’ must be ‘worked together’ (in major ways) with the (modern) concept of probability. (Black, 1972, believed his work did exactly this kind of ‘working together.’ Let me also add that our modern use of probability helps show why a ‘First Philosophy’ is not needed for inquiry, which is always fallible and open to revision.)

IV. A DIGRESSION OF SORTS: THEORETICAL REASON

What are we to make of a domain of inquiry that has no necessary principles that are binding on all rational agents? To get a balanced sense of the problems and possibilities, let us turn to the theoretical domain and to the physical sciences. As noted above, Aristotle argued that the form of theoretical reason (or knowledge) is quite different from the form of practical rationality. And he held that theoretical reason is governed primarily by the rules of (formal) deductive logic, but that practical rationality typically takes the form of a deliberation. (Again, notice that Aristotle had no notion of an ‘inductive logic’ that uses probability; see Hacking, 2001.)

In the last half century, Western thinkers and, in particular, Thomas Kuhn (1970, 1977), have argued that Aristotle was quite wrong about theoretical reason. For example, Kuhn has argued that theoretical reason itself has the form of
practical rationality (phronesis). In the current philosophy of science literature, then, a widely held (if not the dominant) view is that theory choice itself takes the form of practical rationality, in which the scientist has to weigh (comparatively) the key epistemic values: for example, simplicity, explanatory power, predictiveness, and agreement-with-what-we-have reason to accept so far. Thinkers such as Elgin (1996), Hacking (1999), Hooker (1987, 1995), Kuhn (1970, 1977), and Scheffler (1997) have argued that the (earlier) positivistic and Popperian views are inadequate in large part because such accounts cannot allow scientists any serious role in making value judgements involving the epistemic values. These principles are not universal and neutral; they are actually general principles whose meanings are largely specified by the current theories and standards in the socio-historical context. Thus, scientific theory choice is itself best seen as a kind of ‘practical rationality.’ And, as I noted above, an adequate characterisation of good scientific judgements will view as typically deliberative those judgements involving complex interactions of the generals and particulars (see Elgin, 1996; Hooker, 1995). (And given the way ‘practical rationality’ is open to revisions and new developments, it should be regarded as a placeholder term concerned with scientists being responsible in deciding what to do.)

I hope you will find my digression into ‘theoretical reason’ helpful. I have been considering what is recoverable from Aristotle; but Aristotle’s account of theoretical reason is seriously inadequate, and it cannot be recovered.

V. Teaching and Educating as a Social Practice Embodied in Institutions

Let me now show how the recovered conception of ‘phronesis’ (or practical rationality), which centrally involves deliberative judgements in a social practice, can greatly enhance our conception of professional actions and especially professional reasoning (or judgement). I want to show that an adequate characterisation of good professional judgements can and should be seen as involving complex interactions of the generals and particulars.

Here I focus on teaching and follow the lead of Lee Shulman (1987/2004a) who argued for the central role of a kind of practical rationality in the activities of a professional teacher. My contribution is to extend and deepen his work by developing a much more complex conception of ‘practical rationality.’ My recovery of Aristotle’s ‘phronesis’ yields a conception with a complex model of judgement, where judgement is at the heart of being a (good) professional. And, as noted above, Jeffrey Stout (1990) has also provided some very good steps for enhancing our conception of the role of ‘phronesis’ in nursing (caring and doctoring). Recall that from Stout we recover the ‘practical wisdom’ along with the related virtues (all of which a good professional teaching program should foster). I gratefully use and extend his work in the educational setting: teaching as an (embedded) social practice.

My first step is to make plausible that teaching (as a professional activity) is a ‘social practice’ (in MacIntyre’s sense) by drawing out its internal goods and standards of excellence, which I think can be done by modifying (to some degree)
John Dewey’s view of teaching (see Dewey, 1938/1997; Frankena, 1965). For Dewey, a student’s learning almost always has extrinsic value, for what the student has learned will often be highly useful later in life. But Dewey also wanted the learning (now) to have intrinsic (or internal) value. And I think we can use the following remarks by Dewey to get closer to an understanding of this intrinsic value. As Dewey (1938/1997) put it:

[real] freedom . . . is a power: the power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to chosen ends into operation.

Natural impulse and desires constitute . . . the starting point. But there is no intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remaking, of impulses and desires . . . . This remaking involves inhibition of impulse . . . What has been said [above] explains the meaning of the well-worn phase “self-control.” The ideal aim of education is the creation of power of self-control. (p. 64)

First, I hope it is clear that what Dewey means by freedom (as a power) and self-control is very similar to, if not the same as, the recovered conception of ‘phronesis.’ Second, if the ideal aim of education is the development of the power of self-control, where both the teacher and the learner share this aim, then the student (the learner) and also the teacher should and will likely see the development of ‘self-control’ as having internal (or intrinsic) value. Finally, since educational activities are governed by such moral values as caring and respect, these activities can and should be seen as having internal (or intrinsic) value. Thus, the activities of teachers and students (and the results of those activities) have both extrinsic and internal (or intrinsic) values related to the internal goods and excellences. Here I can draw from Stout’s (1990, p. 272) discussions. I hold that teaching can and should be a profession because it can and should be a social practice in which teachers (and principals) have the relevant virtues. Teachers (and principals) should have practical wisdom (the ability to exercise sound educational judgement and discernment), a sense of justice (the capacity and disposition to give others their due), and the attitudes of temperance and courage. And teachers and principals should also have hope (the mean between despair and presumption), faith (trust in genuine educational and moral authorities), and love of the good (properly ordered desire for goods internal to the practice, sought for their own sake).

These, then, are my arguments for holding that the teaching profession can and should be a social practice. Elsewhere, Pitman and I (2008) have argued that, on balance, teaching in Ontario should be, and is overall, a professional enterprise. In the next few paragraphs, I want to illustrate the range and scope of practical rationality (or phronesis) in teachers’ professional activities. (Here I will be concerned only with elementary and secondary public schools.)

First, in Canada, the Constitution Act of 1867 gives the provinces the right to control public education. And in Canada, the provinces (by and large) control
elementary and secondary public schools by means of a major legislative statute called the *Education Act* and the so-called *Regulations* to the *Education Act*. The *Education Act* also sets out the duties and powers for teachers, principals, school boards, the Ministry of Education, and the Minister of Education. (Recall that the *Education Act* enables and restricts what teachers can do.)

Here I shall start with Ontario’s *Education Act* (sec. 264) and the related Regulation 298 (sec. 20), which set out (most of) the primary duties and responsibilities for being a teacher. The *Education Act*, sec. 264.1.c actually states that teachers are to “inculcate by precept and example respect for religion and the principles of Judaeo-Christian morality.” How can this statement be legitimate in a pluralistic, democratic society? Well, the Ministry of Education has issued *Policy/Program memorandum (PPM) 112*, which states that a teacher’s trying to get a student to accept any religious doctrine (in the secular) public schools is indoctrination and that such action is forbidden. And this *PPM 112* reflected adequately what the Ontario courts have ruled about teaching religion: a teacher can teach about religions, but cannot try to get a student to accept any particular religious doctrine. Still the (provincial and federal) courts have stated that they do expect teachers to inculcate basic morality and the basic principles and values of a democratic society (as largely set out in the Canadian Charter of Freedoms and Rights). The *Education Act* Regulation 99 states that teachers must treat students equitably and with respect. Now in setting out these teacher duties, teachers are assumed to have the background knowledge and understandings to judge wisely (to deliberate wisely) so that the teacher may act morally and treat students fairly and respectfully.

In 1996, the Ontario government passed the *Ontario College of Teachers Act*, an act explicitly designed to promote teaching as a profession and as a social practice with *internal* goods and excellences. Although the *Teaching Profession Act* had been passed in 1943 and had established that all teachers must belong to one of the teacher federations, over the years, many had come to believe that the federations were acting mostly as a union in which the primary concerns were working conditions, pay, and pensions. In other words, many had come to believe that the federations’ focus was primarily on the *external* goods. (Both of these acts are still on the books; and both acts continue to, in various ways, both enable and restrict teachers.)

Let me draw out briefly the responsibilities of the Ontario College of Teachers (OC of T). The OC of T now has sole responsibility for credentialing, reviewing, and disciplining its members. To help carry out these tasks, it has produced *Foundations of Professional Practice* (2006), which has three parts, one of which is “The Ethical Standards of the Teaching Profession.” The ethical standards are grouped into four major categories: care, respect, trust, and integrity. The ethical standard for the category of care states: “The ethical standard of *Care* includes compassion, acceptance, interest, and insight for developing students’ potential.” Members express their commitment to student “well-being and learning through positive influence, professional judgment and empathy in practice” (p. 9). I maintain that such moral values constitute (some of) the standards for judging the
goods and excellences internal to the social practice of teaching. Here, again, teachers are assumed to have the background knowledge, understandings, and commitments to judge wisely (to deliberate wisely) so that the teacher may live up to these professional values.

In the last decade or so, some teachers were found to be having sexual relations with their students. The OC of T subsequently produced “Professional Advisory: Professional misconduct related to sexual abuse and sexual misconduct” (2002), which clarified the key terms and established that a teacher has a professional (and often a legal) obligation both to refrain from having sexual relations with students and to report (to various bodies) a teacher colleague if the teacher has reason to believe such inappropriate sexual relations are occurring. Here, a teacher’s carrying out the obligation to report such activities helps to either maintain or restore the internal goods of the practice.

Ontario teachers are also bound by Education Act Regulation 181 to understand the needs of special education students and to implement the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for all special education students in the class. I have not explicitly stated what should be obvious: teachers typically interact with many students at a time. A typical class has approximately 25 students; and, in such a class, a teacher may well have more than a few special education students who have been judged to be ‘exceptional’ and who have a suitable IEP. In such a class, then, teachers are expected to understand the various kinds of exceptionalities and the related IEP, to develop ways to carry out each student’s IEP, and to treat each student in caring and respectful (and professional) ways. It should be clear that to carry out these duties, teachers must have the appropriate background knowledge and commitments, be able to judge wisely, and be ready to act upon these reasonable judgements. A teacher’s helping the special education students to meet their learning needs is an internal (or intrinsic) good in the social practice.

Let me give an example of another kind of case in which practical rationality and its related virtues are centrally involved. Here I will need to provide a bit of the historical background. The Ontario government has passed the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) 1990, which requires that all professionals, teachers included, report child abuse. In the original version of CFSA, the key words were “reasonable grounds to believe.” So, then, in fulfilling one’s duty under the original CFSA, a teacher needed to understand the typical symptoms of child abuse and report when the teacher has “reasonable grounds to believe” that child abuse has occurred (or is likely to occur). Thus, a teacher must be able to interpret in a reasonable way what a student’s actions and statements might mean and be able to judge whether there exist “reasonable grounds to believe” that child abuse has occurred. In the original version of the CFSA, however, the standard “reasonable grounds to believe” was apparently interpreted by most professionals to constitute a good deal of evidence (perhaps enough evidence for one to infer that it was more probable than not that child abuse had occurred.)

Those who were concerned about child abuse, however, came to worry that such a high standard of evidence would likely mean that serious cases of child abuse would go unreported (and thereby uninvestigated), so they urged revision of the
CFSA. In the revised (current) version, in fulfilling one’s duty under the CFSA, a teacher must understand the typical symptoms of child abuse and report when the teacher has “reasonable grounds to suspect.” And here “reasonable grounds to suspect” was not meant to be anywhere near the evidence for holding that abuse was more likely than not to have occurred; the phrase was meant to signify a (comparatively) weak set of evidence. The revision to the CFSA was deliberately intended to lower the amount of evidence a professional needed to thereby increase the likelihood that many more cases of (potential) abuse would be reported. The revised CFSA knowingly put teachers (more) on the side of the student and in potential conflict with parents. Since the revised standard “reason to suspect” was meant to lower the amount of evidence a teacher would need to report a case of child abuse, when comparing the original CFSA with the lowered reporting standard of the revised CFSA, the current CFSA will likely have many more reports but will also likely, overall, lead to many more reports being made in error. Thus, if a teacher were to judge (using the revised standard, have reason to suspect) that a parent were guilty of child abuse, the teacher needs to understand that the probability of a report being an error is now rather high. Therefore, a teacher will need integrity and courage to interact with the parent in a respectful and caring way if the report turns out to be in error. In such situations, the carrying out of a teacher’s legal and moral duties (which are internal goods) is likely (unintentionally) to lead to moral harms (and injuries). (Such moral harms are internal to the social practice.)

Other kinds of cases in which practical judgement is central involve teachers carrying out school safety rules. Under the Education Act Regulation 298, teachers have the duty to use reasonable means to protect the safety of the students in their school. In difficult cases, this duty can lead to the teacher having to search a student if the teacher “has reason to believe” that the student, say, is carrying a weapon or illegal drugs. Here, again, teachers must judge whether they have reason to believe, which is the first part of the two-prong test set out by the Supreme Court of Canada for the legitimate searches of students. At any rate, a teacher’s protecting students from harm is another internal (or intrinsic) good in the social practice.

Now, then, I hope it is clear that in the context of this massive and complex web of rules and standards, it would be very good (even necessary) for teachers to have the virtue of phronesis (and its related virtues) to make sense of the situations, to deliberate well about what to do, and to then act accordingly. In these situations, the professional teacher should use deliberative judgement to decide how to reasonably deal with cases involving complex interactions of the generals and particulars.

But these examples illustrate only part of the story. In Ontario today, the cost of health care has been ever rising and pulling monies away from other ministries. This situation leads to serious questions about whether the province’s various educational policies and programs are being adequately funded. For example, many ask whether the special education programs are being adequately funded. This possibility of underfunding has major implications for teachers who may have either more than a few students who have not yet been ‘identified’ or students for whom the suitable educational assistant has yet to be funded. In such a context, teachers will find it very difficult (if at all possible) to judge what to do to fulfill
their duty to treat students equitably and respectfully. And in such a context, a professional teacher and the professional group (the OC of T) will need to judge wisely about what a professional should do when the government has inadequately funded its programs and policies. Members of the teaching federations, of course, often use work-to-rule tactics to express their dissatisfaction with the external goods provided by the government. But what are the appropriate and fair ways for a professional to express dissatisfaction with the government (or school board) when the internal goods of the practice are being undermined (or not being secured)? Clearly, to carry out these various duties in such difficult situations, teachers must have the appropriate background knowledge and commitments, be able to judge wisely, and then be ready to act upon their reasonable judgements.

In summary, I hope my remarks in this section have made it plausible that in such complex educational contexts, it would be very good if teachers (as good professionals) were to have the virtue of phronesis (and its related virtues) to make sense of the situation, to deliberate well about what to do, and to act accordingly.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In recent decades, there has been much renewed interest in Aristotle’s conception of practical rationality, ‘phronesis.’ In section II, I briefly characterised the concept of profession. In the next sections, I considered what roles the concept ‘phronesis’ can and should play in the professions. In answering these questions, I have set out what can and should be legitimately recovered from Aristotle’s conception, what cannot be recovered, and what modifications need to be made to it. I have argued that ‘practical rationality’ is best seen as a placeholder term concerned with our being (morally and legally) responsible in deciding what to do. Finally, I have tried to show that ‘phronesis’ can and should play a very important role in teaching as a profession in Ontario.

NOTES

i In his later works, Shulman did explicate the concept of ‘profession’ (see Shulman (1998/2004c), especially pp. 529–535; Shulman (1997/2004b). His conception of a ‘profession’ is basically the same as ours.

ii Shulman (1987/2004a) added the following in his footnote 2: “Central to my conception of teaching are the objectives of students learning how to understand and solve problems, learning to think critically and creatively as well as learning facts, principles, and rules of procedure.” Shulman’s objectives are not held by every state (or province). In his 1987 essay, Shulman was concerned to set out the basic forms of knowledge and reasoning. In his later works, Shulman did properly recognise that being a professional also involves moral understanding and commitments see Shulman, 1998/2004c, p. 530.) The recent National Academy of Education book edited by Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) also holds that being a professional teacher involves knowledge, know-how, and moral commitments.

iii See Frankena (1965) and Randall (1960) for a discussion of some of the difficulties.

iv In a viable recovery, making and creating are as important as finding (see Kekes, 1995, 2002).

v And, of course, one’s ultimate ends may conflict with one’s professional obligations. For this chapter, I ignore the moral and ethical issues involved in such a conflict.
For example, J. S. Mill held that, when deciding what to do, one essentially measures the amount of happiness and pain and then aggregates these quantities. Utilitarians such as Mill (1863/2001) hold that deciding essentially involves a calculation.

In one of his more famous papers on moral development, Kohlberg (1971, p. 288) began with a scathing attack on “the bag of virtues approaches.” In his neo-Kantian approach, Kohlberg no doubt saw Aristotle as the main target; but Kohlberg failed to realise that Kant himself, in his later works, put the ‘duties of virtue’ at the centre of his moral views (see Wood, 1999)!

As noted above, in his early work (1987/2004a), Shulman was concerned mostly with explicating the forms of knowledge involved in being a good, professional teacher. In his later work (1998/2004c, pp. 530–531), Shulman correctly acknowledges the crucial role of quasi-moral and moral dispositions and commitments.

Perhaps this account is MacIntyre’s recovery of Aristotle’s praxis by way of Karl Marx.

I should acknowledge that in MacIntyre and Dunne (2002), MacIntyre reiterated his claim that teaching is a not ‘social practice.’ At the heart of his view is that real education initiates students in the forms of the various knowing, but that initiation per se is not a social practice. He holds that teaching in today’s schools cannot even initiate students into the forms of knowledge because the (crude) materialism of society overwhelms any real educative efforts. I believe MacIntyre is mistaken to claim that teaching is not a social practice. Although I too am concerned with the impacts of general cultures on teacher–student activities, I believe teachers can use caring and respectful ways to help students to become critical and responsible practically rational agents. In contrast to MacIntyre, who seems to take theoretical knowledge as the goal, I hold that the goal of a good education is to create practically rational agents. If my views can be defended, then the claim can also be defended that internal goods and excellences in the teaching situation comprise a social practice. Here I tend to side with another Catholic thinker, Jacques Maritain (1943/1960). See also Section V below.

Here MacIntyre is acknowledging that this concept can be recovered from Karl Marx’s thought.

Or, put another way: a First Philosophy conceives of inquiry as needing a set of necessary axioms (and necessary rules) by which to govern its activities. There are good reasons for holding that modern science does not need such a First Philosophy (see Elgin, 1996; Hacking, 1999; Kuhn, 1970, 1977; Quine, 1960).

Since L. Kohlberg’s (1971) highest level, stage six, involves such a formal, universalisability principle, Kolhberg’s views fail, too. And this recent work provides reasons for concluding that the Karl-Otto Apel’s (1980) approach, which is also a priori, cannot succeed.
PRACTICAL RATIONALITY AND A RECOVERY


F.S. ELLETT, JR.


**LEGAL DOCUMENTS**

**Federal Legislation**

Constitution Act, 1982 [en. by the Canada Act 1982 (U.K.), c. 11, s. 1], pt. I (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms).

**Ontario Statutes and Regulations**


Teacher Performance Appraisal, O. Reg. 99/02.


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