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PHRONESIS, POETICS, AND MORAL CREATIVITY

ABSTRACT. At least since Aristotle, *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and poetics (making or creating) have been understood as essentially different activities, one moral the other (in itself) non-moral. Today, if anything, this distinction is sharpened by a Romantic association of poetics with inner subjective expression. Recent revivals of Aristotelian ethics sometimes allow for poetic dimensions of ethics, but these are still separated from practical wisdom *per se*. Through a fresh reading of *phronesis* in the French hermeneutical phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur, I argue that *phronesis* should be viewed as at least in part poetic at its very core. That is, *phronesis* deals with the fundamentally *tragic* human situation of moral incommensurability, and it responds to this by making or *creating* new moral meaning. Such a poetics of practical wisdom helps *phronesis* stand up to significant and important critiques made of it by a range of modernists and post-modernists, pointing a way forward for some important contemporary moral debates.

KEY WORDS: Aristotle, creativity, dialectics, ethics, otherness, *phronesis*, poetics, practical wisdom, Ricoeur, tragedy

INTRODUCTION

In Book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes *phronêsis* (practical wisdom) from *poiêsis* (art or production) in the following way. While *phronêsis* and *poiêsis* have in common that, in contrast with theoretical wisdom, they both deal with “things which admit of being other than they are” (“the realm of coming-to-be”), *phronêsis* “is itself an end,” namely “good action,” whereas *poiêsis* “has an end other than itself,” namely a work of art or a product (Aristotle, 1962, book VI, 1140b, lines 5-6).¹ This in essence means that *phronêsis* has to do with action in its own right, *poiêsis* with action as a means to something else. The result is that the one belongs to the realm of ethics, or the goods *internal* to action, the other the realm of aesthetics, or goods produced by or imitative of action.

This distinction – which echoes in a milder form Plato’s famous expulsion of the poets from his ideal moral republic – has had, and continues to have, a profound influence in Western moral thought. Today, perhaps exaggerated even further by Romantic understandings of poetry, we tend to

¹The Greek is as follows: “*tês men gar poiêseôs heteron to telos, tês de praxeôs ouk an eiê: esti gar autê hê eupraxia telos.*”



separate artistic expression from ethical discourse quite sharply, the one often conceived of as private, inner, subjective, and non-moral (at least in itself), the other public, intersubjective, and moral. Such a distinction is made explicitly, for example, in the otherwise chiefly non-Aristotelian discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas, who distinguishes subjective, artistic ‘expression’ from intersubjective, moral ‘normativity’ (1981/1984, pp. 325–337). In general today, artists, writers, artisans, and practical scientists may be held to moral criteria governing the *uses* of their products (as in limits on pornographic viewership or the employment of nuclear weapons), and they often deal with moral *subjects*, but the activity itself of making or creating is generally thought to be different in kind from the activity *per se* of moral practice. In turn, moral life is typically assumed not to involve poetic making or creating, at least not at its normative core.

This paper uses the work of the contemporary French hermeneutical phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur to question these long separated activities of *phronêsis* or ‘practical wisdom’ (which I will henceforth refer to simply as ‘phronesis’) and *poiesis*, ‘making,’ ‘creating,’ or ‘poetics.’ Although Ricoeur does not make a connection between the two directly himself, he does develop a novel theory of moral phronesis which, I argue, derives its distinctiveness ultimately from his underlying and much longer philosophical project of a ‘poetics of the will.’ By showing where practical wisdom and poetic creativity intersect, I hope to demonstrate, without conflating the two activities, that moral practice is at least in part poetic or creative of necessity, a possibility which I argue is repressed in much of modern and contemporary moral thought.

PHRONESIS PAST AND PRESENT

The recent revival of interest in Aristotelian ethics has occasioned several retrievals of the concept of phronesis as a significant moral category. These retrievals frequently define phronesis over against poetics, but they also, in different ways, provide clues beyond Aristotle to their possible moral relation. Apart from non-moral uses of this term (see, for example, psychological meanings in Noel, 1999; Smith, 1999), recent moral interpretations of phronesis fall into three broad categories: an anti-utilitarian practice of situated reasonableness, a communitarian application of shared values to particular situations, and concrete attention to human particularity. Before examining the differences here, let us first look into Aristotle himself and why he distinguishes phronesis from poetics in the first place.

It has long been noted by scholars of Aristotle that his *Nicomachean Ethics* has two closely related but in some ways distinct definitions of phronesis (see, for example, Fiase, 2001). The first points to the human capacity to deliberate about the human good *qua* end in itself. Thus, Aristotle defines phronesis as “the capacity of deliberating well about what is good and advantageous for oneself,” and this not just “in a partial sense” but regarding “what sort of thing contributes to the good life in general” (1962, Book VI, chapter 5, 1140a, lines 26–28). The *phronimos* (phronetically wise person) is good at grasping the nature of the good. A second definition points instead, however, to deliberation about the *means* to the good rather than the good end itself: “[moral] virtue makes us aim at the right target, and practical wisdom makes us use the right means” (1962, Book VI, chapter 12, 1144a, line 8). This second definition is made in response to the question of why the intellectual virtue of phronesis would be necessary if one were already directed to the good by moral virtue itself (for example, if one were already courageous by habit, why would one need to deliberate well about courage?). The answer is that true moral virtue involves hitting the right target not just accidentally or for some other reason but *for the right reasons*, that is, by deliberating about the ‘right means.’

However one chooses to blend or prioritize these two aspects of phronesis, the point in Aristotle is that phronesis introduces into moral life a capacity to pursue the good deliberately and by reason, it being the ‘intellectual virtue’ concerned specifically with moral activity. This does not mean that phronesis governs the moral virtues independently – as if virtue came from reason itself, as in Kantian ethics – only that exercising or striving to exercise moral virtue *itself* requires a certain practical wisdom. As Aristotle says, “it is impossible to be good in the full sense of the word without practical wisdom or to be a man of practical wisdom without moral excellence or virtue” (1962, Book VI, chapter 13, 1144b, lines 31–32). As rational beings, we cannot be virtuous by indoctrination or education alone but must be good moral deliberators too.

It is largely for this reason, however, that phronesis is not *poiêsis*. Phronesis does not *produce* something new. Rather, it perceives the good that has already been determined by human potentiality and personal habit, and deliberates either on it or about how to reach it. It understands and pursues a good – happiness or *eudaimonia* – that is already written into the fabric of human nature. *Poiêsis*, on the other hand, produces *new* goods like plays and stories (and crafts and buildings), so that while it may sometimes be a useful *instrument* for moral life, it is not a moral activity in itself. As Aristotle puts it in his *Poetics*, *poiêsis* merely *imitates* moral action:

“the poet . . . is a poet by virtue of the imitative element in his work, and it is actions that he imitates” (1947, chapter IX, 1451b, lines 28–29). The poet may produce a certain cathartic moral *effect*, but this effect only returns us to what was right to do all along. Or, as Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *poiêsis* (as in Greek culture at large) is given the broader meaning of ‘making’ or ‘fabricating’ in general (not just stories), poetics is excellent or virtuous according to the quality of its *product*, not the moral character of the creative action itself.

One of the most extensive discussions of Aristotelian phronesis today is made by Joseph Dunne, who if anything distinguishes phronesis and poetics even more sharply than does Aristotle. This distinction is compared to Hannah Arendt’s division between ‘action’ and ‘making’ and Habermas’ between ‘lifeworld’ and ‘system.’ On the one hand, phronesis is a genuinely moral activity because it enables us to act and live in common with one another. It is, as Dunne puts it, “the kind of reasonableness fitted to our finite mode of being” (1993, p. 381). On the other hand, *poiêsis* is a species of *technê* or technical skill in making a product, which unrestrained by phronesis threatens to undermine the *polis* and to colonize the moral lifeworld. Poetics is associated with a ‘deconstructive’ tendency in post-modernity toward “self-generating and self-justifying inventiveness to produce for each moment something better – or, nihilistically, just to *produce*” (p. 381). Mere production itself reduces ethical life to the utilitarianism of the marketplace.

Dunne therefore reads Aristotelian phronesis, as do others who find in Aristotle an antidote to modernity, as a needed capacity for resisting the nihilistic moral logic that has invaded contemporary social values. A sharp division from phronesis is used to contrast the pursuit of the human good in civil society with an economic consumerism concerned only with technical individualistic calculation and production. As a result, Dunne and others tend to emphasize the capacity for phronesis to determine and perceive the right human *end* – indeed to perceive that there is a substantive and moral, as opposed to merely utilitarian, end at all – and to downplay suggestions in Aristotle that it may also calculate *means* (to ends already established). What is needed, today at least, is a phronesis that can provide social life with a more substantive moral compass. The poets are again virtually banished, at least from the realm of morality.

A somewhat more complex view, however, is provided by the communitarian ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre, who gives phronesis the more modest role of applying socially constituted moral virtues to the particular contemporary situation. Phronesis on this reading is focused, unlike in Dunne, on the *means* to already traditionally embedded constituted ends

(the ends of the *polis*). Indeed, MacIntyre views social ends as perhaps even more deeply already conditioned than does Aristotle, for they are not transparent through examining human nature, but already constitute one's very moral consciousness itself through one's own particular traditional historicity. For MacIntyre, "there is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other" (1988, p. 350). In this way, MacIntyre re-interprets Aristotle to suggest that "phronesis is the exercise of a capacity to *apply* truths about what it is good for such and such a type of person or for persons as such to do generally and in certain types of situation *to oneself on particular occasions*" (pp. 115–116, my emphasis). Phronesis is the means by which we 'apply' already given moral 'truths' (inherited from tradition) to our own particular present situation.

What, then, becomes of *poiêsis*? Although MacIntyre himself has relatively little to say about this distinct intellectual virtue, one can detect a certain implicit distinction between phronesis and poetics precisely around the means and ends of moral life. Although the ends of phronesis are already determined by traditions, traditions are themselves in fact somewhat plastic; they transform – and can be transformed – over history. Traditional ends are not just inert deposits from the past but also 'arguments' which have to be *made* and *re-made* – that is, *produced* – over against rival traditions. "A living tradition then is a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (1984, p. 222). Not only are goods 'tradition-constituted,' but traditional goods themselves are – we might say – 'constituted' through a process of extended historical discourse.

This means that traditional ends themselves – even if MacIntyre does not exactly put it this way – are in a sense 'poetic' creations. It is this formation or development of moral ends that appears to be precisely what MacIntyre's own ethical writings attempt to accomplish, being not just histories of traditions but also efforts to re-constitute given traditions meaningfully. This is obviously vastly different from modern conceptions of 'poetics' as subjective expression. Rather, in a more Greek sense, the process of traditional argumentation *produces* conceptions of the good, which phronesis, by contrast, then applies to the present situation. Indeed, when traditions undergo what MacIntyre calls an 'epistemological crisis' – a fundamental breakdown of coherency – this, he says, "requires the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new type or types of theory" (1988, p. 362). Is not this 'invention' of 'new concepts' of the good precisely of the order, at least implicitly, of a kind of moral

poetics? And does not this kind of poetic making therefore not only contrast with but also relate to, albeit indirectly, the activity of phronesis?

Still a third way that Aristotelian phronesis is interpreted today makes a connection with *poiêsis* still more clearly, even if it too, still following Aristotle, keeps these activities distinct. The ethicist Martha Nussbaum adopts some of the inventive and imaginative dimensions of post-modernism (that Dunne finds opposed to phronesis) within her Aristotelian view of the role in practical wisdom of fictional literature. In contrast with MacIntyre, however, poetics in Nussbaum functions not to establish the *end* toward which practical wisdom should be directed, but as a *means*, literature being a vital, perhaps even necessary, instrument for becoming a practically wise person.

Novels and tragic poems and plays – which for Nussbaum epitomize *poiêsis* – provide a unique and important education in what she calls ‘moral attention,’ that is, attention to the concrete particularities of actual persons and situations around us (1990, p. 162). Practical wisdom consists in overcoming ‘moral obtuseness’ and ‘simplification’ by sharpening, through literary narratives, our capacities for ‘moral perception,’ ‘moral imagination,’ and ‘moral sensibility’ (1990, pp. 154, 164, 183–185; see also 1995). These phronetic capacities are not, as in MacIntyre, means for ‘applying’ historically established moral ends, but for Nussbaum the very end and completion of moral life as such. Moral wisdom consists precisely in attention, care, and perception of human particularity.

Thus, poetics has the role in Nussbaum’s ethics of a means to this phronetic end. “Stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are” (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 184). Moral tragedy – which as in Aristotle is the height of poetics – plays a particularly strong role for Nussbaum because it attunes its audience to the need for overcoming the simplification and narrowness that cause tragic conflicts in the first place, by teaching us to attend to the particular singularity of others. Nussbaum sees in Aristotle, in contrast with Plato, not just a separation of *poiêsis* from *phronêsis*, but also a sense for their connection in the tragic sensibility required for a full moral life. In this way she follows in a way a German line of thought from Hegel to Hölderlin and Nietzsche that makes moral life tragic in itself (see Schmidt, 2001). While Plato dreamed of an ordered republic of ‘goodness without fragility’ – in which the tragic poets are banished – Aristotle, in Nussbaum’s view, sensed ‘the fragility of goodness’ and the need for poetic attention to the vulnerability, particularity, fortune, luck, and changeability of the human moral situation (Nussbaum 1986/2001, pp. 5, 138). Thus, “we find,

then, in Aristotle's thought about the civilized city, an idea we first encountered in the [tragic play] *Antigone*: the idea that the value of certain constituents of the good human life is inseparable from the risk of opposition, therefore of conflict." (p. 353).

These contemporary Aristotelian perspectives on phronesis illustrate three major strategies for distinguishing it from, even while in successively deeper ways relating it to, the inventive, making, creative activity of poetics. Even Dunne, who retains the distinction most sharply, suggests in contrast with Aristotle that poetic rationality may be *itself* a form, albeit a destructive one, of morality as in utilitarianism. MacIntyre and Nussbaum go even further beyond Aristotle's distinction by connecting phronesis with certain poetic dimensions of morality either implicitly as forming moral ends or explicitly as a vital moral means. Despite these important possible qualifications on Aristotle's distinction, however, none of these perspectives seriously entertains the possibility – which would question Aristotle's distinction fundamentally – that phronesis may be poetic *in itself*. Let us explore such a possibility before returning to what it says about these largely Aristotelian accounts.

RICOEUR'S CRITICAL PHRONESIS

Ricoeur comes at phronesis from a different angle, that (broadly) of post-structuralism, albeit of a form still open to Aristotle in part. His theory of what he calls 'critical phronesis' is part of his larger ethical and hermeneutical project of understanding how selves form and develop meaning in relation to their world. This project appropriates aspects of modern reflexive philosophy into a post-modern hermeneutics of suspicion and transformation. Ricoeur shares with Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, and others a decentering of the immediate ontological transparency of the self to itself; but unlike many of his Continental contemporaries, he insists that meaning still ultimately *belongs to*, and hence is in part *created by*, interpreting selves as such. For this reason, Ricoeur is the only major post-structuralist that I know of who speaks of phronesis in any detail, making his theory of this practical capacity quite unique.

Apart from the larger question of poetics, which we will come to shortly, Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self allows him to take up the concept of phronesis – generally shunned by post-modernists as helplessly hegemonic – as a practice in which selves take the singularity or alterity of others into

account. Phronesis is 'critical,' for Ricoeur, precisely insofar as it goes beyond Aristotelianism to include also a Continentally revised Kantian element of decentering or openness to others *qua* 'other.' It is in 'critical phronesis,' in fact, that, for Ricoeur, Aristotelianism and Kantianism ultimately meet, in which one finds their profoundest hidden common presuppositions. Indeed, "if there is anything to deconstruct in 'moral philosophy,' it is precisely [the] quickly stated opposition between the deontological and the teleological" (Ricoeur, 2002, p. 287). Both of these imply, Ricoeur claims, a singular and capable moral 'self' or 'will' who is other from all others. This complexity of Ricoeur's ethics, combined with the fact that it has developed over almost half a century of scattered and diverse articles and chapters, helps explain why it has been variously interpreted as either Kantian (Albano, 1987; Anderson, 1993; O'Neill, 1994; Schweiker, 1993), narrativist or communitarian (Dauenhauer, 1986; Jervolino, 1990; Kemp, 1989, 1995; Leeuwen, 1981; Sweeney, 1997), or somewhat deconstructionist (Bourgeois and Schalow, 1990; Lawlor, 1992). In his rather more recent theory of critical phronesis, however, this multifaceted moral perspective finds something, I would argue, of a novel culmination.²

According to Ricoeur, "practical wisdom [critical phronesis] consists in inventing conduct that will best satisfy the exception required by solicitude," that is, "the exception on behalf of others" (1990/1992, p. 269). This 'exception' consists, along post-structuralist lines, in the recognition of others as ultimately irreducible to one's own understanding or interpretation of them. It recalls in a way the ethics of the commanding face of the other of Ricoeur's Parisian colleague Levinas. But rather than affirming the other's otherness as such, critical phronesis goes further and attempts to 'satisfy' this exception in the self's own conduct in the world, to make from within this situation of incommensurability with others an actual 'judgment in situation.' This means that practical wisdom is charged, for Ricoeur, with an essentially *dialectical* task, dialectical, not in Hegel's sense of a conclusive moral synthesis (more on Hegel in a moment), but in the sense of an imperfect mediation of others' "proposals of meaning that are

²In addition to these philosophical dimensions of his moral thought, Ricoeur has also written extensively on ethics and religion. As I argue elsewhere (Wall, 2001), and as others have pointed out (Klemm, 2002), Ricoeur's religious ethics is significantly patterned on its philosophical structures, taking these structures, as he puts it, to their limits or extremes. This paper does not enter into this somewhat separate religious question.

at first foreign” in the direction of an endless “path of eventual consensus” (1990/1992, p. 289). The end or goal of critical phronesis, never completed but always to be pursued, is an ever greater ‘mutual recognition’ of self and other (ibid.). This unsettling and self-disruptive task is embodied concretely in forming what Ricoeur calls ‘universals in context’ or ‘potential or inchoate universals,’ universals, that is, not in the Kantian sense of laws, but in the inconclusive and decentered sense of provisional moral mediations amidst difference (p. 289).

Somewhat like Nussbaum, in fact, Ricoeur views practical wisdom as essentially *tragic* in nature. According to Ricoeur, Aristotle’s own concept of phronesis presupposes a hidden ‘tragic source’ of which Aristotle himself does not seem explicitly aware, a sense from the Homeric and tragic poetics – in which Greek culture was steeped – of a certain ‘wisdom of limits’ concerning the possibilities for social coherency (1997, pp. 13, 22, my translation). Tragic plays like Sophocles’ 441 B.C.E. *Antigone* (1991), for example – *the* play of choice for philosophers of tragedy since Hegel – illustrate our all too human moral ‘narrowness’ and “one-sidedness of angle of vision” (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, pp. 241–249). Antigone pursues the family good of burying her dead brother Polyneices despite his having died fighting as a traitor to his city, while Creon, the king, pursues the opposed state good of preventing the burial despite thereby flying in the face of ancient family rite. Each in a way, from her or his own narrow angle of vision, is entirely justified. Yet the consequence is the triple suicides of Antigone, Creon’s son who is Antigone’s lover, and Creon’s wife distraught over her son. The tragedy, according to Ricoeur and others, is less in the results than in their all too human causes: “the source of the conflict lies not only in the one-sidedness of the characters but also in the one-sidedness of the moral *principles* which themselves are confronted with the complexity of life” (1990/1992, p. 249; see also 1979/1991 and 2000). The lesson Ricoeur draws is that a critically phronetic capacity must confront the concrete complexities of life in which the ‘other’ remains always to some extent an ‘exception’ to our own existing and inevitably too simple moral projects.

Unlike Nussbaum, however, Ricoeur does not therefore view tragic poetics as a literary *means* to practical wisdom. Rather, more like Hegel, Ricoeur sees tragedy as powerful in literature precisely because of the tragic nature of *human practice itself*. As Szondi (1978/2002) has pointed out, a shift can be detected between pre-modern philosophies of tragedy as a literary genre (as in Plato and Aristotle) and an increasing acceptance in figures like Shelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche that tragedy describes a fundamental dimension of human action or existence

itself. For Ricoeur, tragedy requires us to face and overcome our own historical narrowness, not just *through* literature, but in poetically re-shaped *practice*. This picks up on Hegel's view that tragedy is a dimension of the dialectical movement of ethical life itself (*Sittlichkeit*), a negative moment within the larger movement of Spirit (*Geist*) in actual social history (Hegel, 2001, pp. 237, 281, 326).

Unlike Hegel, however, Ricoeur uses the term 'critical phronesis' to suggest that we are speaking, not of a synthesizing or totalizing Spirit, but of the finite and limited practices of singular individuals. One is reminded of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel for constructing a system that leaves the singular individual to live in a broken-down shack outside it. Ricoeur does not read the *Antigone*, for example, as Hegel does as a dialectical conflict of the larger 'moral forces' of family and state. Such conflicts, for Hegel, represent *unmediated Sittlichkeit*, and thus are part of history's irrevocable movement toward 'reconciliation' or 'rational necessity,' elements propelling the Spirit's "omnipotent and righteous Destiny" of 'Eternal justice' (Hegel, 2001, pp. 49, 51, 237, 281, 324–326; for Ricoeur on Hegel here, see Ricoeur, 1979/1991, p. 205). For Ricoeur, instead, the conflict is between these larger historical forces and the singular strivings of Antigone and Creon as selves, Antigone against the hegemony of the state, Creon against the long-standing traditions of family piety. This brings Ricoeur in a way back to Nussbaum, for whom tragedy has a singularizing, anti-simplifying, particularizing (we might even say deconstructive) function. However, unlike Nussbaum, Ricoeur still views the tragic as a dimension not just of literary imagination but also of human *existence* in the world, the situation of selfhood within the community of singular others.

BETWEEN ARISTOTLE AND KANT

What is unique about Ricoeur's view of phronesis is in the end that it draws Aristotle into a fundamental relation with Kantianism. Ricoeurian critical phronesis is a culmination of separate teleological and deontological capacities in the self which it mediates through a kind of 'hermeneutical arc' of moral practice. It is the capacity to pursue the good, not simply or directly, but *dialectically* in relation to the particular and singular otherness of others. As Ricoeur rather cryptically puts it, "the practical wisdom we are seeking aims at reconciling Aristotle's *phronêsis*, by way of Kant's *Moralität*, with Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*" (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 290). Aristotelian deliberation about the good is brought into contact with a radical-

ized Kantian respect for others as such, in a Hegelian-like dialectics of the mediation of tragic social conflict. In this case, however, *Sittlichkeit* “has been stripped of its pretention to mark the victory of Spirit over the contradictions that it itself provokes,” and ‘reduced to modesty’ becomes the practice of “public debate, friendly discussion, and shared convictions [in which] moral judgment in situation is formed” (pp. 290–291). Critical phronesis is each self’s capacity – which can be more or less well realized in actuality – for the public, dialectical formation of social convictions that are ever more radically accountable to the exception required by respect for each and every other.

This means that on one level critical phronesis is indeed a form of what Ricoeur non-pejoratively calls Aristotle’s ‘naive phronesis.’ This initial teleological dimension of phronesis means that it involves the practice “of judging well and acting well in a momentary approximation of living well” (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 180). Like MacIntyre, Ricoeur here sees phronesis as applying traditional and historical values to the formation of one’s own “narrative unity of life” (pp. 169–202). It aims at the “integration of actions in global projects, including, for example, professional life, family life, leisure time, and community and political life” (p. 177). On this level, Ricoeur largely accepts, in contrast with the large part of both modernity and post-modernity, the Aristotelian thesis that judgments about good action are grounded in larger communities of practice in common.

At the same time, however, in contrast with MacIntyre, even this pre-Kantian pursuit of the good is performed, for Ricoeur, by a fully reflexive and singular *individual*. The formation of goods at any level realizes selves’ capacities for what he calls ‘self-esteem’ (*estime de soi*), or attesting to oneself (in one’s actions) as capable of forming one’s given historical and social conditions into a singularly coherent narrative meaning *for oneself* (Ricoeur, 1960/1986, pp. 120–124; 1990/1992, pp. 169–202). Narrative goods, however socially constituted, are for Ricoeur also inherently reflexive, for they are formed in the end by singularly self-interpreting subjects. It is to particular, existing individuals that, echoing his teacher Gabriel Marcel, Ricoeur says communal goods ultimately *belong*. Ricoeur in fact criticizes MacIntyre precisely on this point: “for MacIntyre, the difficulties tied to the idea of a refiguration of [the interpreter’s own individual] life by fiction do not arise” (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 159). Here again, Ricoeur reads a ‘tragic’ dimension into Aristotelian ethics which Aristotle and his followers often suppress, a sense in which – as in the *Antigone* – community and selfhood are both mutually constituting and yet also in profound tension.

This affirmation of the self-within-community is the opening, however, through which Ricoeur introduces into phronesis a Kantian or critical dimension. Self-esteem is said to presuppose a further kind of deontological 'self-respect' (*respect de soi*), respect for selves as self-interpreting others *in their own right*. Self-respect is not an independent moral value but an *intensification* of the self-esteem already implied in social life, an intensification that thematizes and radicalizes selves' singular hermeneutical otherness from each other. This means that Ricoeur rejects Kant's sharp separation of deontological (autonomous) ethics from teleological (heteronomous) interest, and instead links them as different expressions of one and the same moral interpretive *capability*. Thus: "I see the whole problematic of ethics [from the good to the right to critical phronesis] as an exploration of one specific capability, the moral or ethical capability" (Ricoeur, 2002, p. 285). While pursuing goods and respecting selves can be distinguished theoretically, selves' teleological capacities for forming narrative meaning for themselves is precisely why they should be respected as singular others. As Ricoeur summarizes this transition: "like me, you can designate yourself as a capable subject" (Ricoeur, 1993, p. 118).

Since it is this Kantian dimension that makes Ricoeur's view of phronesis 'critical,' it is important to note that Ricoeur is reading Kantianism in a uniquely post-structuralist way. Like Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Luce Irigaray, he is concerned with the sense in which the pursuit of goods in common with others can imply a totalizing 'violence' to what he and others call selves' 'genuine otherness' (Ricoeur, 1969/1974a, b, 1987, p. 106, 1988b, pp. 213–214, 1990/1992, pp. 220, 225). Violence from this angle is more radical than the Kantian pursuit of heteronomous interest; it means any form – physical, social, political, or otherwise – of *reducing* others to one's own teleological projects, to what Levinas calls 'totality' or 'sameness' (1961/1969, p. 289), or what others refer to as moral 'hegemony' or 'grand narratives.' The other is not just a Kantian analogy to oneself, but an originator of its own moral command not to violate its alterity.

For Ricoeur, however, regard for otherness cannot be separated ultimately from self-esteem. In Ricoeur's view, "violence is equivalent to the diminishment or the destruction of the power-to-do of others," that is, the capacity in others precisely for selfhood (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 220). Otherness is not here an absolutizing command that reduces the self, as Levinas says, to the other's 'subject' or 'hostage,' to a "passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter" (Levinas, 1974/1981, pp. 11, 14, 19, 141, 180–185). Levinasian critics of Ricoeur have a point that Ricoeur does not always appreciate the *hyperbolic* or *originary* otherness

of the other.³ However, it does not necessarily follow that otherness unseats active selfhood as such. The other, Ricoeur claims, still demands the self's deliberate *response*. Such a response is possible only if, however other the other remains, the self is still able actively to recognize its otherness and make judgments in the world accordingly. As Richard Kearney argues, Ricoeur shows that "to be absolutely hospitable to the other [without selfhood] is . . . to suspend all criteria of ethical discrimination" (2003, p. 72).

Whatever one may think of Ricoeur's relation to Levinas, which we cannot settle here, the important point is that for Ricoeur the deontological moment of respect for otherness is not an independent moral foundation but a dimension of phronesis itself. As Ricoeur puts it, deontology constitutes a negative dialectical 'test' of the self's own pursuit of the good, the test of non-violence, non-instrumentalization, non-reduction of similarly capable others (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 203).⁴ Rather than separating the good and the right, Ricoeur places them in dialectical relation, so that the narrative good is at once unsettled and decentered by the claims of otherness yet not completely overthrown. This allows the 'tragic' dimension of phronesis to stand: the other remains absolutely other, and yet I am still required to make it a response in my own practices in the world. Antigone and Creon are incommensurable, yet they must still find a way to live together.

³This Levinasian critique of Ricoeur is made most forcefully in Cohen (2001, pp. 283–325). Although I do not have the space to defend it here, I still agree with Joy (1993, p. 332) and Wallace (2000, p. 312), however, that Ricoeur is much closer to Levinas here than often thought (and Levinas and Ricoeur themselves claim to deeply appreciate each other's work). I would argue that Cohen's strong rejection of Ricoeur, based chiefly on Ricoeur's theory of teleological self-esteem, ignores the importance of Ricoeurian critical phronesis as a capacity precisely for responding to otherness as such. Nevertheless, there is room for a more extended conversation than I can pursue here between Ricoeur and ethical Levinasians like Derrida (1992/1995), John Caputo (1993), Alphonso Lingis (1994), and Simon Critchley (1999).

⁴It is instructive here also that Ricoeur critiques the deontological ethicist John Rawls at some length, and precisely along the lines that Kantianism can be used only as a 'test' of ordinary phronetic practice, not an independent moral 'procedure' in its own right (see Rawls, 1993, 1971/1999). Ricoeur claims that "the social contract [of Rawls] appears capable only of drawing its legitimacy from a *fiction* – a founding fiction, to be sure, but a fiction nonetheless. Why is this so? Is this because the self-foundation of the political body lacks the basic attestation from which good will and the person as end in himself draw their legitimacy? Is it because peoples, enslaved for millennia to a principle of domination transcending their will to live together, do not know that they are sovereign, not by reason of an imaginary contract, but by virtue of the will to live together that they have *forgotten*?" (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, p. 239). We cannot, however, pursue this somewhat different moral conversation here.

Critical phronesis is in the end the practice of returning from this detour into the otherness of the other to one's own narrative aims and practices. Now, however, the self confronts the radical complexity of the human situation in the tragic situation of the demand for the other's exception. The disruption of otherness appears to critical phronesis as not just an end in itself but, finally, a disruption *of* the self as such, the self in all its teleological narrative particularity and purposiveness. Critical phronesis mediates others' "proposals of meaning that are at first foreign" in the direction, not of a Hegelian absolute synthesis, but of moral practices in common that are ever more genuinely and hyperbolically inclusive (1990/1992, p. 289). It is this disorienting possibility for mutual recognition between tragically other others that critical phronesis endlessly, radically, and on some level impossibly pursues. This makes of phronesis, as we will see, both a means and an end in itself: a means to creating narrative meaning that includes attention to otherness as an end.

PHRONESIS AND POETICS

In what sense, then, does Ricoeur's more post-modern view of phronesis suggest a closer link than in the more straightforwardly Aristotelian views above to poetics? Although Ricoeur does not explicitly point it out, his discussion of phronesis in fact takes place within a larger investigation into questions of narrative and meaning that *are* quite explicitly 'poetic.' It is no accident, despite the perplexity this can cause Ricoeur's readers, that his writings on critical phronesis are developed precisely around his concept of the reflexive narrative self, a self which in many ways is the fulfillment of his long career examining the poetics of the will, or the self's hermeneutical creation of meaning.

Ricoeur's notion a 'poetics of the will' was first proposed in his 1950 dissertation *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, at which early point it was anticipated to be a theological investigation into "the world as created . . . [involving] *the death of the Self*, as the illusion of positing of the self by the self, and the *gift of being* which heals the rent of freedom" (Ricoeur, 1950/1966, p. 30). This 'poetics' of the will was to constitute a future third moment in a larger 'philosophy of the will,' following first a Husserlian 'eidetics of the will' (completed in the dissertation itself) and then a mythologically and symbolically conceived 'empirics of the will' (completed in Ricoeur, 1960/1986 and 1960/1967). However, even though Ricoeur did go on to write a great deal in religious hermeneutics, he abandoned this religious 'poetics of the will' before even begin-

ning it, since, as he later explains, his work in symbolism itself left him unconvinced of the Jasperian ‘poetics of Transcendence’ that he had initially intended to develop (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 13).

Instead, in fact, the notion of ‘poetics’ becomes dispersed in Ricoeur’s career over a range of primarily philosophical – that is, not *specifically* religious – projects. Thus, as Ricoeur later explains, his investigations into symbolism, metaphor, and narrative share a common poetic philosophy:

The Symbolism of Evil, The Rule of Metaphor, Time and Narrative [three of Ricoeur’s major works of the 1960’s, 1970’s, and 1980’s respectively] do aspire in several ways to the title of poetics, less in the sense of a meditation on primordial creation than in that of an investigation of the multiple modalities of what I will later call an ordered creation . . . [which] still belongs to a philosophical anthropology (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 14).

This poetics of ‘ordered creation’ centers on the unique power of selves to use language for ‘semantic innovation,’ that is, the creation of meaning through various kinds of linguistic “synthesis of the heterogeneous” (1983/1984, p. ix). As Kearney has put it, “Ricoeur’s ultimate wager remains a hermeneutics of the creative imagination, [so that] replacing the visual mode of the image [as in Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty] with the verbal, Ricoeur affirms the more *poetical* role of imagining – that is, its ability to say one thing in terms of another, or to say several things at the same time, thereby creating something new” (Kearney, 1989, p. 2).⁵

For example, symbolism, for Ricoeur, involves a kind of ‘spontaneous hermeneutics’ by which language opens selves up to new possibilities for meaning. As Ricoeur summarizes it, “the symbol gives rise to thought” (Ricoeur, 1960/1967, p. 348). Symbols such as ‘stain’ for ‘evil’ are not allegories which merely *stand for* a thought which could be expressed more directly; they actually create, produce, or innovate thought in the process of selves interpreting them into meaning. Similarly, metaphors, for Ricoeur, are “the most brilliant illustration of the power of language to create meaning by the means of unexpected comparisons” (1983/1984, p. 27). Although metaphors differ from symbols in comparing two or more terms with one

⁵This poetic dimension of Ricoeur’s philosophical project is noted by other readers of Ricoeur as well. Hans Kellner, for example, views narrative selfhood as “the quintessence of Ricoeur’s vision of humanity” (1993, p. 55). Mary Schaldenbrand sees in Ricoeur’s oeuvre a distinctive philosophy of ‘metaphoric imagination’ that describes the self’s production of meaning by ‘kinship through conflict’ (1979). And similarly poetic readings of Ricoeur are given by his major French interpreters Jean Greisch (1992), Jean Grondin (1993), and Olivier Mongin (1988).

another (for example, life is a tale told by idiots), they retain the analogous poetic function of symbols by, as Ricoeur puts it, “introduc[ing] the spark of imagination into a ‘thinking more’ at the conceptual level” (1975/1977, p. 303). Metaphors are not just alternative ways to represent concepts, but dialectical means by which particular new meaning is formed.

Most importantly for our purposes, however, is Ricoeur’s poetics of the semantic innovation involved in narratives. Like symbols and metaphors, narratives (both fictional and historical) can be understood under a “philosophy of the creative imagination” as “operat[ing] on the verbal level to produce new configurations of meaning” (1981, p. 39). Narrative specifically configures meaning in relation to *time*, that is, over the course of a developing plot (whether fictionalized or historical), so that, in Ricoeur’s view, “time becomes human to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative” (1983/1984, p. 3). Narratives involve a ‘semantic innovation’ in a similarly dialectical way to symbols and metaphors: by ‘configuring’ language into a concrete story or text with a world of meaning of its own, narratives are able to ‘refigure,’ through their interpretation, the further world of meaning (or thought) of their *reader* (1983/1984). By reading a created narrative, I also re-create anew my narrative self-understanding of myself.

More recently, and more directly related to ethics, Ricoeur has argued that this self who thinks *from* symbols, metaphors, narratives, and the like (included here are also traditions, culture, and even expressions of God) is *itself* poetic in the sense of reflexively capable of forming its *own* ‘narrative identity.’ Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity can be read, in fact, as Domenico Jervolino aptly puts it, as the “poetic . . . culmination of [Ricoeur’s] philosophical discourse on the will” (1990, p. 135). This means that, in contrast say with MacIntyre, Ricoeurian ‘narrative identity’ is not just the self’s passive or involuntary constitution from without – from history, traditions, community, relations, and so on – but also, and at the very same time, its voluntary, active, dialectical, innovative, creative constitution of itself. The deep phenomenological roots here lie in Marcel’s view that the human body is not just an object in the world but also *my* body, a body which existentially belongs to and has specific meaning *for me* as a singular individual. Ricoeur expands this eidetic insight into all areas of human life – emotions, habits, actions, social relations, histories, even brute biology – each of which contributes to my experience of my own narrative *meaning*. I at once receive this identity from without and yet interpret it creatively – through symbols, narratives, and so forth – for myself. From out of traditions, texts, and language, the self’s narrative identity becomes “the poetic resolution of the hermeneutical circle” (Ricoeur, 1985/1988a, p. 248).

This poetics of the self allows Ricoeur to speak of the self as itself an ongoing poetic innovation. This means that narrative identity is at once ‘character’ – the already constituted “set of lasting dispositions *by which* a person is recognized” (1993, p. 105) – and ‘ipseity’ or ‘selfhood’ – actively, reflexively, irreducibly a “phenomenon of mineness, or ownness” (1993, p. 108). The narrative self is neither Kant’s nouminous ego (or Descartes *cogito*), forever unchanging like the starry heavens above, nor utterly subsumed (as post-liberals and post-modernists sometimes imply) within its shifting historical and social contexts. Rather, one’s narrative identity is an ongoing mediation between on the one hand the diverse elements by which one is *already* constituted, and on the other one’s evolving, if never conclusive, capacity for *creating* meaning for oneself over time. “Narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity. Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same incidents . . . , so also it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives. . . . In this sense, narrative identity continues to make and re-make itself” (Ricoeur, 1985/1988a, pp. 248–249). My narrative identity is the product of my larger poetic capacity for semantic innovation as this is applied reflexively and creatively to my own concrete being in the world.

The result, even though Ricoeur does not put it this directly himself, is that the self’s practice of phronesis is ‘poetic’ in two related ways. First, it is poetic because it arises in response to the *tragic conflict* of the will’s passive-active relation with its larger narrative conditions. The tragedy of Antigone, for example, is ‘poetic’ in this sense in that it illustrates, perhaps in an exaggerated way, the kind of threat to narrative identity faced in the relation of singular selves to states. This threat, in its broadest sense, is the discordance of the self’s own existing particular meaning to itself with the larger social history on which this meaning nevertheless depends, a potential rupturing of meaning through one’s own narrative incommensurability with others. The tension of selfhood and otherness is taken through tragic wisdom to its breaking point.

But second, and more importantly, critical phronesis is also then conceivable as a poetic *response*. From this angle, phronesis is charged with rendering the self’s passive-active tension with its community and with others productive of new and ever more inclusive moral meaning. Because the morally tragic arises out of selves’ narrowness of angle of vision – passionately clung to as in the *Antigone* by Antigone and Creon both – nothing less is called for ultimately than one’s refiguring of one’s own narrative identity in recognition of otherness. If critical phronesis means pursuing goods which account ever more radically for the other, then this task requires the constant and endless re-creation of the self’s narrative

ends in the world. This is more than a post-modern decentering of oneself; it is an effort to take both one's own narrative identity and otherness into account at the very same time.

On this 'poetic' reading, the phronetically wise person is one who can mediate, or at least begin to mediate – without reducing to violent synthesis – its own narrative identity with the radically other moral worlds of others. This is what it means to account for the other as 'exception.' Phronesis would seem to require a new semantic innovation, a new narrative sense of meaning for the *phronimos*, a narrative that ever more creatively and dialectically responds to the other's disruption. While 'naive' phronesis grounds narrative identity in past or existing narratives alone, critical phronesis would demand in addition the creation of new narrative identity that is ever more radically other-inclusive. Like in a story, such inclusiveness is not already given at the start but instead unfolds uncertainly over time; unlike in a story, it is the endless moral responsibility, in relation to others, of actual self-creative selves as such. Such, it seems to me, is the poetic conclusion one may draw from Ricoeurian phronesis when it is read within the context his larger poetics of the will.

POETIC PHRONESIS

From these indirect suggestions in Ricoeur, the outlines of a poetic necessity *within* (and not just related to) phronesis may begin to emerge. I want to conclude by sketching a theory – with and beyond Ricoeur – of not just critical but *poetic* phronesis. I propose to do this by returning to our conversations with contemporary Aristotelianism. The result will be a form of phronesis – close to Ricoeur's but more historically situated and attentive to particularity – that, to use Aristotle's words, is not only 'itself an end' but also 'has an end other than itself,' namely (in our case) the production of new meaning on the basis of difference. Or, more precisely, phronesis becomes poetic at its very core by involving the self's dialectical capacity for creating or innovating ever more responsively inclusive social meaning.

Dunne and others are surely right that if ethical life is reduced to market utilitarianism then we have lost sight of a more profound practical wisdom by which social ends as such are subject to consideration and public debate. It is not difficult to see mere technical rationality today escaping the realm of economic and technological production and invading families, neighborhoods, culture, values, and public discourse. As Habermas and others rightly observe, this consumeristic moral individualism is one

of the defining marks of our age. It may also be true that some brands of post-modern deconstructionism play into and even legitimize this nihilistic, disconnected, anti-relational, and a-responsible state of affairs.

There is no reason to assume, however, that 'poetics' is reducible to this kind of moral utilitarianism. Even Aristotle, however much he separates poetics from phronesis, clearly views poetics itself in a quite different light, namely as a literary means for great public and social catharsis. Nussbaum is right in this respect to see Aristotle as suggesting that especially tragic poetics, if not a phronetic activity in itself, is at least a moral *means*. (It was indeed not their subjectivism but their great *public* power that led Plato to banish the poets from his ideal republic). If poetics today sounds subjectivistic and even nihilistic, this is largely through the influence of eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism, which no doubt for its own good reasons elevated inner expression and feeling over any kind of classical poetics of the social order.

Poetics may be re-imagined, however, in a way that avoids the Scylla and Charybdis of classical hegemony and Romantic subjectivism. In moral life, at least, poetics can mean the dialectical refiguration of tragic social differences into ever more *inclusive* – if never finally *conclusive* – social meaning. Like in Aristotle, such a view is analogous to art and artisanship in that it generates something newly refigured (narrative relations) on the basis of otherwise diverse and unrelated materials (narrative otherness). But beyond Aristotle (and in a way beyond Greek tragic poetry as well), we need to go further and say that this activity belongs specifically to *singular* selves, selves with an otherness or nonsubstitutability beyond any concrete social order as such. The morally tragic dimensions of poetry suggest that poetic phronesis creates new meaning precisely *on the basis of* selves' tragic differences and incommensurabilities. These differences should neither dissolve nor remain in absolute conflict but instead 'give rise to thought.'

This type of phronetic poetics of the creation of new social meaning needs to be complicated in two further ways. First, MacIntyre is right that in some sense phronesis is profoundly rooted in history. The very point of view from which a phronetic mediation may take place is itself traditionally and linguistically pre-constituted. I am not convinced that Ricoeur fully

⁶Ricoeur tends to associate history either with unknowable subjective thrownness (as in Heidegger) or with texts that outlast their original configuration (as in Gadamer). Anglo-American 'new historicism,' however, along with communitarianism, views history as tied also to the actual social context *behind* the configuration of texts, so that, for example, the meaning of the Bible is conditioned in part by its larger Greco-Roman world.

appreciates this historicism of moral life.⁶ However, this does not mean that phronesis should be limited only to the *application* of that history to the present. This application – or, as I would prefer, interpretation – of tradition is faced with the above fact of poetic moral singularity: selves not only have different and conflicting traditions but they also, more fundamentally, interpret even the same traditions differently and in conflicting ways. A phronesis that failed to account for selves as others would not face its truly tragic dimensions. Antigone and Creon both have coherent traditions on which to draw for resolving their conflict, but what is also needed is a capacity to interpret these traditions creatively in light of otherness. Contra Hegel, the aim should not be social synthesis (to which MacIntyre comes all too close to suggesting), but finite and ongoing mediations of selves who remain ultimately irreducible or ‘other’ to one another’s interpretations of them. Phronesis *begins* in history, but its poetic task is to interpret history in new directions capable of creatively accounting for otherness.

The concept of poetics helps us imagine how this refiguration of history is not *opposed to* but rather *part of* the refiguration of the self in response to others. The common factor – at the intersection of history and otherness – is the reflexive, self-creative self. This self, however, is not the modernistic ego. It is like the poet, playwright, artist, or novelist. It creates something new, not out of thin air, but out of the depths of a language, symbolism, and culture that is thereby inhabited, recovered, re-fashioned. Poetic phronesis involves, in the moral sphere, a dialectical engagement with historical language in the service of a dialectical engagement with the other. In phronesis these two tasks cross: the self addresses its tragic incommensurability with others precisely *through* the innovative transformation of its own moral historicity.

Such a poetic phronesis suggests also, however, not just a creative self and a re-creation of history but also a new kind of dialectical relation with otherness. The reason Nussbaum comes closest to our Ricoeurian account is that she locates practical wisdom in this tragic dialectic with the singular other in itself.⁷ Nussbaum arguably does a better job than Ricoeur, in fact, of showing how phronesis opens the self’s imagination up to the other in all its concrete particularity. Phronesis should address not just the con-

⁷Nussbaum herself, incidentally, notes this parallel between her own ethics and Ricoeur’s, applauding the fact that “Ricoeur’s approach to the problem of tragic conflict moves well beyond that of Kant, who simply denied that such conflicts ever arise,” denied, in other words, that “the good things are plural and incommensurable” (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 272).

flict of self and other but also the creative re-organization of their actual and concrete goods. Ricoeur and his fellow post-structuralists sometimes describe otherness so abstractly that it disappears into unnamable nothingness. As Don Browning has suggested, phronesis should involve serious conversation about the re-ordering of teleological hierarchies (2002, p. 259). Creon's responsiveness to Antigone needs to be to her particular familial and personal claims, not just to some general sense of her ineffable difference. Poetically conceived, phronesis needs to create new narratives of family, state, and other goods in which these goods themselves are ever more inclusively restructured.

However, beyond Nussbaum, poetics is involved in phronesis not just in the *perception* of otherness but also in making otherness a concrete practical response. The difficult task of phronetic judgment is to address one's singular tragic conflict with others in this world in an ever more particularizing and mutually inclusive social dialectics. It is not just the difference of self and other that demands phronetic mediation, but the unique violence of this difference to the actual world of the other, a violence which demands creative mediations of social practice and meaning.

Phronesis is 'poetic,' therefore, in the end, in that it implies at its very core the endless re-creation of concrete social relations. This inconclusive task requires each self's ever more radical inclusiveness of genuine otherness in its own social understanding and practices. Phronesis is indeed an activity of the *polis* – the social and not merely subjective arena – but *polis* may now be understood poetically as not just what a community holds in common but also the tragic tensions of singular difference. Antigone and Creon require phronetic mediation because they *both* belong to the same community *and* stand in apparently irreconcilable conflict. While their difference is never overcome, we as their spectators gain a profound experience of the possibility for renewing social catharsis. We can begin ever anew to picture how the intractability of our social differences may nevertheless give rise to social innovations of meaning. This dark and limited *via media* involves the capacity to tolerate social uncertainty and difference in order to create through a process of dialectical attention to otherness new relations of ever more genuine other-inclusiveness.

The practically wise self must therefore, contra Aristotle, in many respects be a poet. Although poetics has various dimensions in human affairs – artistic creation, technological advance, scientific discovery, cultural expression – it is also deeply involved, perhaps not so surprisingly after all, in moral activity as well. Indeed, poetics is arguably *more* radically involved in moral life than anywhere else, for here the process of creation is not just *by* but also *between* irreducibly other selves, and precisely in

their very irreducible otherness. The ‘product’ here is not an artistic or literary object, much less a crass market gain, but a new way of living situatedly among others, a new practice in which others also participate. The distinction between phronetic ‘ends’ and ‘means’ folds in upon itself: the ‘end’ of creating ever greater social inclusivity with others is met only by the ‘means’ of ever more inclusive social creativity. Phronesis is not just ‘itself an end’ but also ‘has an end other than itself’ in the mediation of the tragic incommensurability of others into new social relations.

I believe this way of conceiving of phronesis has wide moral implications. It places phronesis (and more broadly ethics) within a range larger human projects of creativity and making such as the arts, sciences, and humanities. It introduces into traditional Aristotelian ethics a sense for reflexive selfhood and otherness for whose lack Aristotelianism is often rightly criticized by modernists and post-modernists. It provides post-structuralism a way to speak of moral life that addresses charges of nihilism and a-normativity. Perhaps most importantly of all, it may help to rescue moral reflexivity from the arid modernistic desert of applying supposedly universal principles to particular situations. The kind of reflexivity involved in poetic phronesis is the more difficult and inconclusive – and ultimately more human – activity of creating within difference ever more profoundly responsible social meaning. In this case, we might revise the slogan of the German Enlightenment (taken not incidentally from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*) – “*Sapere aude!*” or “Dare to know!”, which Kant renders “Have courage to use your own reason!” (1959, p. 85) – and say instead, with even greater radicality, “Dare to create!”

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