# PHRONESIS AS POETIC: MORAL CREATIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY ARISTOTELIANISM

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IN BOOK 6 OF HIS *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*, Aristotle distinguishes *phronesis* or "practical wisdom" from *poiesis* or "art," "production." Neither deals with the universals of pure science or theoretical wisdom but rather with "things which admit of being other than they are," "the realm of coming-to-be." But phronesis "is itself an end," namely "acting well" (*eupraxia*), whereas poiesis "has an end other than itself" (*heteron to telos*), namely a work of art or a product.[1] Phronesis is realized insofar as it is practiced well in itself, and it involves right deliberation about goods internal to human action such as courage and justice. Poiesis is realized insofar as it produces something good beyond itself, in the making of noninternal goods such as crafts or goods imitative of action such as stories. Aristotle is here modifying Plato's limitation of the role of the poets in his moral republic, but in a milder form that does not see the poets as actively distorting morality but rather performing a different kind of activity. Practical wisdom and poetics are both teleological practices—that is, practices aimed at some end—but the first finds its end within the practice itself, the second finally beyond it.

Such a distinction between ethics and poetics has had an enormous influence over Western moral thought. Augustine's *Confessions* condemns rhetoric and public amusements as morally corrupting to the soul. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* repeats Aristotle's distinction almost word for word. Immanuel Kant's second and third critiques draw a sharp line between the objectivity of the moral law and the subjectivity of aesthetic taste. The Romantics and Friedrich Nietzsche turn the opposition on its head, contrasting the stultifying laws of morality with a more authentic inner creativity "beyond good

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[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 6.5.1140b5–6.

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and evil."[2] Today, Jürgen Habermas, for example, can uncontroversially divide moral intersubjective "normativity" from poetic innersubjective "expression."[3] We hold artists, storytellers, craftspeople, and scientists accountable to moral criteria governing the uses of their creative products (as in limits on pornographic viewership or the employment of nuclear weapons); and artists may deal with moral subjects. But the activity itself of making or creating that defines "poetics" is generally assumed to be different in kind from the activity of living an ethically good life.

This paper explores a range of contemporary Aristotelian perspectives on ethics to suggest new ways in which, beyond Aristotle himself, phronesis or practical wisdom does in fact involve a necessary element of poetics, making, or creativity. After examining ethics and poetics in the rather different appropriations of Aristotle made by Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum, I then go farther afield to the more innovative and postmodern use of Aristotle made by Paul Ricoeur. Each of these contemporary ethicists takes us a step deeper into the relation of moral phronesis and poetics. On these bases, I then challenge this ancient quarrel between the philosophers and the poets and argue that phronesis holds promise as a vital moral category today precisely insofar as it is conceived of as creative at its core.

## I

Let us start by asking why the distinction between phronesis and poetics is important to Aristotle himself. It has been noted that the *Nicomachean Ethics* has two related but different definitions of phronesis.[4] The first definition concerns the human good or end. Phronesis here is "the capacity of deliberating well about what is good and advantageous for oneself."[5] It is the "intellectual virtue" specifically

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 304, 309.

[3] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 325–37.

[4] See Gaëlle Fiasse, "Aristotle's *Phronêsis*: A True Grasp of Ends as Well as Means?" *The Review of Metaphysics* 55 (December 2001): 323–37.

[5] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.5.1140a26–8.



concerned with understanding the moral good. One deliberates through phronesis not just "in a partial sense" but regarding "what sort of thing contributes to the good life in general." Thus, the *phronimos*, or practically wise person, is good at grasping the nature of the good as such. He understands, for example, what it means to be courageous or just, and uses this understanding to act courageously or justly in actual situations.

A second definition suggests, somewhat differently, deliberation about the means to the good rather than about the good end itself. As Aristotle says, "[moral] virtue makes us aim at the right target, and practical wisdom [*phronêsis*] makes us use the right means."[6] This second definition is made in response to the question of why the intellectual virtue of phronesis would be necessary at all if one were already directed toward the good by morally virtuous habits. If one were already a courageous person, 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, so that it involves deliberating well about the "right means" for hitting that target. There is a certain circularity in this logic that is by no means a vicious one. As Aristotle himself admits, "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."[7] The point is that a good life, for human beings, is not just habitual and conditioned, as say for a horse or a dog, but also thoughtful and deliberate, as befitting the unique nature of the human intellect.

It is largely because of this circularity, however, that phronesis is not poetics. Why does phronesis deal with "things which admit of being other than they are" but does not thereby produce something new? Why is being courageous a choice of one course of action over another but not the creation of anything previously unimagined in the world? It is because phronesis operates within the orbit of human virtues—whether in discerning their ends or finding right means—which themselves are relatively unchanging. The virtues of courage, generosity, friendship, and so on are not mutable but written into the fabric of human nature. One can perceive or realize the human good more or

[6] Ibid. 6.12.1144a8.

[7] Ibid. 6.13.1144b31–2.

less deliberatively, but the good itself—in general, happiness or *eudaimonia*—is final, perfect, self-sufficient. Human nature does not change; what changes is only how perfectly it is realized.

Poiesis, on the other hand, produces goods that are altogether new. Creating a play, a work of art, a chair, or a building does express a fixed human capability for poetics or "making" (as we may translate the word most generally). But this capability is perfected, not in the activity of making itself, but in the quality, pathos, or usefulness of its product. Since poetics is defined by its external products, it inherently changes with circumstance, depends on available materials, and can play freely with the imagination. For the Greeks, poetics can refer generally to all making activities or more specifically to the arts; but in both cases, it is judged as good or not ultimately by the object produced, not by the activity itself of production. Even moral tragedies, which Aristotle claims in his *Poetics* constitute the highest expressions of poiesis, merely imitate moral action. As he says: "the [literary] poet . . . is a poet by virtue of the imitative element in his work, and it is actions that he imitates."[8] Great poetry may produce a cathartic moral effect, but this effect only returns us to what was morally right to do all along. No poet invents moral rightness.

## II

This distinction between ethics and poetics has been interpreted and employed in various ways in contemporary Aristotelian ethics. The simplest of these is to oppose moral wisdom to the product-oriented rationality of contemporary individualism, utilitarianism, and consumerism. For example, the Irish writer Joseph Dunne's *Back to the Rough Ground*—one of the most extensive recent discussions of phronesis in the English language, and part of a revival of interest in phronesis in Aristotle[9]—contrasts practical wisdom with poiesis understood as a species of *technê* or technical skill in making a product. The postmodern world, in Dunne's view, embraces a thin poetic morality of "self-generating and self-justifying inventiveness to produce for each moment something better—or, nihilistically, just to *produce*."[10] Phronesis, on the other hand, is the practice of living and acting well by a substantive and common moral compass. Dunne compares this poetic–phronetic distinction to Hannah Arendt's division of "making" from "action" and Habermas's separation of the bureaucratic "system" from the substantive moral "lifeworld." Phronesis, for Dunne, demarcates "the kind of reasonableness fitted to our *finite* mode of being"—as opposed to the infinite deconstructive productivity of mere self-expression.[11] It calls us back to the "rough ground" of the realization of our concrete human nature.

[8] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, 2d rev. ed., ed. Richard McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 9.1451b28–9.



Dunne's argument is persuasive insofar as it takes on moral individualism and consumerism, but it is less persuasive in linking such problems to poiesis. Postmodernist inventiveness and openness to difference may involve more than just nihilistic self-gain and the production of new values merely for the sake of their newness. Poetics is not necessarily a dimension of utilitarian technique. Indeed, Dunne downplays the sense in Aristotle himself in which phronesis too can be concerned not only with right human ends but also with the means to achieve them. By associating phronesis exclusively with the perception of the human good itself, Dunne and others like him exaggerate the distinction from poetics found in Aristotle, and in the process, they rob phronesis of something of its intellectual and deliberative dynamism. If phronesis avoids a nihilistic inventiveness for the sake of invention itself, this does not necessarily exclude the possibility that it involves an inventive dimension.

Such a dimension can be found in the more complex view of the relation of phronesis and poetics in the Scottish communitarian ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre. For MacIntyre, phronesis does not exhaust

[9] Apart from the authors discussed in this paper, others writing recently on phronesis include Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Johannes A. Van der Ven, *Formation of the Moral Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Jana Noel, "On the Varieties of 'Phronesis'," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 31, no. 3 (October 1999): 273–89; and Richard Smith, "Paths of Judgment: The Revival of Practical Wisdom," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 31, no. 3 (October 1999): 327–40.

[10] Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: 'Phronesis' and 'Techne' in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 381.

[11] Ibid. (my emphasis)

the whole field of ethical practice, but rather it has the more modest role of ethical application. Phronesis applies historically constituted moral virtues to the particularities of the contemporary situation. Interestingly, in fact, phronesis for MacIntyre is primarily focused on deliberation about right moral means. Social ends themselves are here arguably even more deeply preconditioned than in Aristotle, for they are not just written into human nature but constituted in the very historical languages available to us for interpreting human nature in the first place. As MacIntyre says, "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."[12] Phronesis for MacIntyre is then "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*."[13] Phronesis is the means by which the already constituted "truths" of moral traditions are interpreted into practice for individual circumstances.

What, then, becomes of poiesis? MacIntyre has clearly absorbed the postmodern "linguistic turn" and views the use of moral language as more than mere personal self-inventiveness. While MacIntyre does not, to my knowledge, discuss poetics as an intellectual virtue as such, he does describe the moral good as transmitted through history in the form of narratives and calling persons to a "narrative unity of life." Poetics enters moral life, for MacIntyre, in a sense directly opposed to Dunne, precisely in the constitution of right human ends. While phronesis deliberates about the means for applying tradition-constituted virtues, these virtues or ends themselves are in fact somewhat plastic and changeable. They transform and are constantly retransformed over the course of historical debate, both within and between traditions. As MacIntyre puts it, "a living tradition then is a historically extended, socially embodied *argument*, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[14] Common goods are not only constitutive of moral life but also, at least in part, constituted by an active and creative process of ongoing historical dialogue and narration. MacIntyre's writings themselves are meant to illustrate precisely this practice of the self-conscious shaping and production of traditional norms.

[12] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 350.
[13] Ibid., 115–16 (my emphasis).
[14] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.



Such a poetics—if we may call it that—is possible within this largely Aristotelian framework because it is less modern than Greek. Making and inventing is less a question of subjective expression than of the production of shared public values. Indeed, when traditions undergo what MacIntyre calls an "epistemological crisis"—a fundamental breakdown of inner self-understanding—then, he says, moral life "requires the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new type or types of theory."[15] Thus, although MacIntyre does not explicitly put it this way, a community's interpretation of the good itself is formed by a kind of tradition-constituting poetics, which phronesis, after this constituting work has been performed, has the task of applying to the contemporary situation.

MacIntyre, however, runs into a different kind of difficulty than that found in Dunne. Phronesis is not sharply opposed to poetics, but it is still sharply separated. Phronesis takes on a significantly more modest role than in Aristotle, a role oriented primarily around the means for moral application rather than the understanding of the moral good itself as well. There is even a sense in which phronesis is reduced to a moral instrument, an instrument of preconstituted traditional ends. It can handle the conflicts and ambiguities of the present situation only insofar as it places itself in the service of an already substantively formed historical framework. Indeed, MacIntyre suggests at the beginning of *After Virtue* that lacking such a framework in the contemporary world, phronesis can hardly be practiced today at all. While MacIntyre introduces a more robust possible relation of phronesis to poetics, therefore, he does so at the price of a robust phronesis itself.

A third and even more complex interpretation of the relation of phronesis to poetics exists, however, in the contemporary American Aristotelian ethicist Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum is not only explicit in her use of the notion of poetics in understanding morality, but she views phronesis itself as dependent upon the specifically poetic practice of reading fictional literature. Novels and tragic poems and plays—which for Nussbaum epitomize poiesis—provide a unique and necessary education in practical wisdom. Through their fine-grained

[15] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* 362.

explorations of human moral dilemmas and conflicts, various forms of poetic literature help to develop in their reader a greater phronetic capacity for what Nussbaum calls "moral attention."[16] That is, stories train us to attend to the rich and concrete particularities of the actual persons and situations around us. The chief purpose of practical wisdom is not to apply moral traditions to the present, but to overcome individuals' natural "moral obtuseness" and "simplification" of one another's actual lives through sharpened capabilities for "moral perception," "moral imagination," and "moral sensibility."[17] As Nussbaum puts it, "Stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are: to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new . . . to wait and float and be actively passive."[18]

As in Aristotle, in Nussbaum the height of poetics is the literature of tragedy. But for Nussbaum this is not because tragedy deals with the weightiest moral subjects, but because tragedy provides the most powerful education in practical wisdom itself. Nussbaum follows a German line of thought, from Hegel to Hölderlin and Nietzsche, that sees moral life as tragic, not just accidentally or occasionally, but implicitly and inherently.[19] Tragedy is not just a literary genre but also a dimension of the human moral condition. Nussbaum argues that while Plato dreamed of an ordered republic of "goodness without fragility," in which the tragic poets are censored, Aristotle more perceptively sensed the tragic "fragility of goodness." Implicit in Aristotle can be found the need to pay attention not only to shared social goods but also to the vulnerability, fortune, and luck of particular others.[20] According to Nussbaum, "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

[16] Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 162.

[17] Ibid., 154, 164, 183–5. See also Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[18] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 184.

[19] See Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); and Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[20] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5, 138.



human life is inseparable from the risk of opposition, therefore of conflict."[21] Deepening Aristotle in this rather contemporary way, Nussbaum argues that poetics trains one to think more deeply and concretely about moral difference.

Nussbaum's view, however, also has its drawbacks. In a sense exactly opposed to MacIntyre, in Nussbaum poetics becomes an instrument for phronesis. Phronesis becomes an end in itself and poetics becomes the literary and narrative means for bringing it about. Phronesis describes the fixed and universal human moral end of attending to others in their singular particularity. Poetics is then a necessary means for training in humanity toward this goal. Nussbaum's account is more complex than MacIntyre's in the sense that this end and means are analogous to one another: to attend concretely to others is the same kind of activity as to attend concretely to literary narratives. But these activities also remain separate in their functions in moral life. Practical wisdom is good in and of itself; it simply describes our human moral responsibility to one another. Poetics is good (in the moral sense) only insofar as it nurtures and advances this otherwise self-sufficient moral aim. Related to this difference is the fact that poetics itself in Nussbaum contains less of the active Greek sense of making or forming something new that is still present in MacIntyre. Poetics has to do primarily with a Kantian perception of objects, an aesthetic openness to beauty and the sublime: in this case, in the particularities of persons and situations in literature. Hence, poetics may be useful for practical wisdom, but practical wisdom is still not itself a poetic activity.

## III

Our investigation can be pressed still one step further by turning to the very different, and indeed rather unique, conception of phronesis in the French hermeneutical phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur. Without leaving Aristotle behind, yet recognizing Aristotle's distinct limitations, Ricoeur situates practical wisdom within what he calls a "poetics of the will." This he does in *Oneself as Another* under the concept of "critical phronesis" (*la phronèsis critique*). What makes phronesis "critical" for Ricoeur is the introduction into ethical life of a

[21] Ibid., 353.

radically open-ended responsibility toward the other, the other not just as different from oneself (as in Nussbaum) but also in its absolute moral irreducibility, alterity, nonsubstitutability. Ricoeur uses the notion of critical phronesis to incorporate the widely used French postmodern category of "the other" into a partly Aristotelian practical ethical framework. Practical wisdom becomes poetic in the sense that it destabilizes and decenters the self's moral will and hence demands its ongoing self-transformation.

This dynamic and transformative function of critical phronesis is explained by Ricoeur as a cycle of moral capabilities that includes both an Aristotelian good and a Kantian right. The Aristotelian moment of this cycle involves, somewhat as in MacIntyre, "the desire to live well with and for others in just institutions."[22] Ricoeur sees here what he calls a "naive phronesis," a preliminary phronesis, of forming one's existing social contexts into one's own "narrative unity of life."[23] This capability should not overshadow, however, a further capability for deontological respect for others in their "genuine otherness" as also capable of moral self-narration. Somewhat like Emmanuel Levinas, Ricoeur views the ethics of the other as a negative interdiction against the moral violence that is inherent in all efforts by selves to narrate others.[24] Unlike in Levinas, however, this obligation to others does not exhaust moral responsibility but is rather a destabilizing moment within the self's larger realization of practical wisdom.[25] According to Ricoeur, "if there is anything to deconstruct in 'moral phi-

[22] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 158–9, 239.

[23] Ibid., 290. This phrase "narrative unity of life" Ricoeur borrows explicitly from MacIntyre, but he gives it a somewhat different meaning.

[24] Ibid., 219–21, 225. See also Paul Ricoeur, "Guilt, Ethics, and Religion," trans. Robert Sweeney, in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974); "Violence and Language," in *Political and Social Essays*, ed. David Stewart and Joseph Bien (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974); "The Teleological and Deontological Structures of Action: Aristotle and/or Kant?" in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 106; and "The Human Being as the Subject Matter of Philosophy," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 14 (1988): 203–215, esp. 213–14. Ricoeur's concept of "otherness" is of course also quite different from that of Levinas, who understands moral poetics as radical disruption; however, we need not enter into this debate here.

[25] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 203.



losophy,' it is precisely [the] quickly stated opposition between the deontological and the teleological."[26]

Critical phronesis is the human capability for negotiating this unstable cycle or tension between self-narration and responsibility toward others. What Ricoeur calls "judgment in situation" involves renarrating one's own teleological practices in new ways that are ever more radically nonviolent toward others. This activity is poetic in the sense that it involves "inventing conduct that will best satisfy the exception required by solicitude . . . the exception on behalf of others."[27] Others ultimately demand not just negation of the self but the self's responsive self-transformation. Critical phronesis does not resolve the alterity of self and other, for this would be impossible. Rather, it risks the act of refiguring or reinventing the self's own narrative aims in ever more other-inclusive ways. Ricoeur describes this unstable tensional possibility in the phenomenological language of "ethical intentionality": moral narration is not just an expression of the self's inner subjectivity but an intentionally or outwardly directed movement toward what is other.[28]

The reason why critical phronesis is an element of the "poetics of the will" is most sharply illustrated in Ricoeur, somewhat as in Nussbaum, in the unique moral wisdom produced by tragedy. Aristotle himself, according to Ricoeur, presupposes an unacknowledged "tragic source" for his conception of phronesis in a Homeric and Sophoclean "wisdom of limits."[29] Sophocles' *Antigone*, for example, reveals the inherent disproportionality and violence contained in all efforts to live well with one another in common, no matter how well-intentioned.[30] Antigone is fully justified from her own narrative point of view in burying her dead brother Polyneices, but so also is the king Creon in banning the burial, since Polyneices died fighting as a traitor to the city. According to Ricoeur, "the source of the conflict

[26] Paul Ricoeur, "Ethics and Human Capability: A Response," in *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, ed. John Wall, William Schweiker, and David Hall (New York: Routledge, 2002), 287.

[27] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 269.

[28] Ibid., 290.

[29] Paul Ricoeur, "À la gloire de la *phronèsis* (*Éthique a nicomaque*, livre VI)," in J. Y. Chateau, *La verité pratique. Aristote. Éthique a nicomaque, livre VI* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1997), 13, 22 (my translation).

[30] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 241–9.

[here] 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."[31] The moral will is not just accidentally but inherently tragic because it can never fully escape its own narrative limitations.

This means that Ricoeur moves beyond Nussbaum's still rather Hegelian reading of moral tragedy as the overcoming of narrowness of moral perspective. He joins Continental thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Pamela Sue Anderson in interpreting tragedy as a description of the ontological human condition of violence toward otherness.[32] The purpose of critical phronesis is not to resolve or sublate moral difference in some third ethical totality. Rather, it is to engage in the unending task of responding to others through an ever more radically inclusive moral narration. No amount of Nussbaumian attentiveness to others' stories can finally make their alterity part of my own story. The tragedy of human moral life is that moral wisdom requires a self-critical awareness of an always inconclusive and self-excessive kind.

The "poetics of the will" becomes ethical, therefore, in the self's capability, not just for moral perceptiveness, but for actively responding to others in a morally self-transforming way. Poetics is a matter of the human will's ability for the genuine "semantic innovation" of its own world of moral understanding.[33] As Richard Kearney describes it, "Ricoeur's ultimate wager remains a hermeneutics of the creative imagination . . . [involving the] ability to say one thing in terms of another, or to say several things at the same time, thereby creating something new."[34] Critical phronesis is the specifically moral poetic

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[31] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 249. See also Paul Ricoeur, "Practical Reason" trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, in Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991); and Ricoeur, "The Act of Judging," in *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[32] I am aware that Ricoeur is open to legitimate criticism from Irigaray, Butler, and Anderson on this score. He is less cognizant of how Antigone as "the other" is marginalized by the very language and culture available to her for overcoming it. However, this debate takes us beyond our focus here on the connection of moral poetics to phronesis.

[33] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), ix.



capability for responding to the tragedy of otherness by refiguring one's own present narrative existence.[35] In this sense, according to Ricoeur, "narrative identity continues to make and remake itself."[36] Critical phronesis is the inherently poetic capability for remaking one's conception of the good to become ever more radically inclusive of otherness.

## IV

While Ricoeur thereby places poetics even closer to the heart of phronesis than any of the above Aristotelians, he also loses what I would like to call their sense of poetic moral realism. By "realism" I mean attention to the concrete particularities of the existing historical situation, prior to and shaping of the self's creative transformation of them. In his effort to describe the self's narration of its relation to the

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[34] Richard Kearney, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutical Imagination," in *The Narrative Path: The Later Works of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. T. Peter Kemp and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 1–31, esp. 2. Similarly "poetic" readings of Ricoeur are made by Mary Schaldenbrand, "Metaphoric Imagination: Kinship through Conflict," in *Studies in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Charles Reagan (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979), 57–81; Olivier Mongin, "Face à l'éclipse du récit," *Traversées du XXe siècle. Revue esprit* (1988): 225–43; T. Peter Kemp, "Toward a Narrative Ethics: A Bridge Between Ethics and the Narrative Reflection of Ricoeur," in *The Narrative Path: The Later Works of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. T. Peter Kemp and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Jean Greisch, "Paul Ricoeur," in *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle. Les oeuvres philosophiques* 2 (1992): 3669–76; Hans Kellner, "As Real as It Gets: Ricoeur and Narrativity," in *Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur*, ed. David Klemm and William Schweiker (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 55; Jean Grondin, "L'herméneutique positive de Paul Ricoeur: du temps au récit," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 3 (1993): 413–27; and Robert Sweeney, "Ricoeur on Ethics and Narrative," in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation*, ed. Morny Joy (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997).

[35] Domenico Jervolino has called narrative identity the "poetic . . . culmination of [Ricoeur's] philosophical discourse on the will"; Domenico Jervolino, *The Cogito and Hermeneutics: The Question of the Subject in Paul Ricoeur*, trans. Gordon Poole (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 135.

[36] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 248–9.

other, Ricoeur (like many contemporary Continental ethicists) overrides the important senses described by MacIntyre and Nussbaum in which the self is already poetically narrated by communities and others themselves.[37] The other in particular cannot ultimately decenter selfhood except in its own concrete narrative particularity. My own conception of phronesis will remain essentially Ricoeurian but argue that moral life's fullest poetic tensions involve embracing this kind of deeper ethical realism.

In MacIntyre we discovered a sense in which practical wisdom relies on a prior capability for forming and inhabiting moral tradition. Although Ricoeur has an extensive theory of moral tradition that we cannot go into here,[38] he still views this past, especially in his moral theory, as proposing relatively intact moral worlds of meaning that selves may directly appropriate for refiguring their narrative present. MacIntyre's quasi-poetics of moral traditions insists that a fundamental dimension of any narrative moral meaning involves addressing traditions' linguistic and epistemological incoherencies. The very term "phronesis," for example, cannot just be taken for granted as a moral capability but also needs to be examined for its concrete development of meaning through figures like Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas. Ironically, in this case MacIntyre himself could benefit from greater historical contextuality, as his own notion of phronesis is rather one-sided, as I have argued. My own account has at least begun such a historical inquiry into the term by tracing Aristotle's changing influence over the meaning of the term today. MacIntyre is right, however, that there is an important creative role—however preliminary, and however much MacIntyre may exaggerate its importance—in shaping the narratives of the very histories themselves, on the basis of which each of us may then be able to narrate our moral worlds.

In Nussbaum, we found an even more important phronetic realism around concern for the concrete narrative world of the other.

[37] A similar critique of Ricoeur's need for "realism" has been made by William Schweiker in "Hermeneutics, Ethics, and the Theology of Culture: Concluding Reflections," in *Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur*, ed. David Klemm and William Schweiker (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 292–313; and by Don Browning in "Ricoeur and Practical Theology" in *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, ed. John Wall, William Schweiker, and David Hall (New York: Routledge, 2002), 251–63.

[38] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 219–27, and Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).



Both Ricoeur and Continental poststructuralism in general focus less on the other's concrete particularity than on its alterior absence, its irreducibility to any form of narration by the self whatsoever. True though this may be, one must also take care not thereby to reduce otherness to an empty and blanket abstraction. Too often in phenomenological ethics, including in Ricoeur, the other is covered by Levinas's mantra of "strangers, widows, and orphans," with little thought for the genuine concreteness of others as uniquely storied members of a world. A genuinely self-transforming response to others involves the hard, creative work of careful perceptual attention to others' subtle and singular narrative complexities. What is needed for a full conception of poetics in moral life is a combined sense for others as resisting narratives of the self yet narratively particular in themselves. The full creative element here has to do not with one side or the other but with the ongoing poetic tension between the two: other-narration and others' narratives, the other's disruptiveness and its real particularity.

This particular element of the poetic moral problem may be illustrated again by Sophocles' *Antigone*. Judith Butler has helpfully described the moral tragedy here as Antigone's struggle for the "performance" of her otherness, in which "the less than human speaks as human."[39] The play arguably proposes that while Antigone and Creon are tragically fated to an unremitting blindness to one another, we the audience are nevertheless—indeed thereby—opened up to new self-transforming moral catharsis. Poetics here is reducible to neither Ricoeur's sense for Antigone's disruptiveness nor Nussbaum's perception of Antigone's particular narrative. Rather, it combines the two in our own openness to renarrating our own moral worlds, as we leave the theater, precisely in response to the narrative world of Antigone. A play that flatly exhorted its audience to respond to the otherness of others would fail to generate such a catharsis. This practically wise self-transformation arises only insofar as we enter into the particularities of Antigone's narrative. Likewise, in all human relations to one another, a poetic element of tension and possibly new self-narration rests of necessity on the degree of realism imparted by the concreteness of others' stories. Others become exceptions, and phronesis becomes thereby critical, only insofar as their marginalized humanity finds narration.

[39] Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 82.

## V

Allow me to conclude by developing, therefore, the outlines of a more realist Ricoeurian conception of phronesis, an Aristotelian–Ricoeurian phronesis that takes into account these deeper forms of poetic moral tension. To indicate this shift, I replace Ricoeur's language of critical phronesis with the more direct language of poetic phronesis. The central element of this poetic phronesis is the reality of human moral tension: tension between broken historical language and self-narration, between accountability to others and others' narratives, and ultimately between being narrated by one's moral world and taking part in narrating it creatively anew. In each of these ways, phronesis is the self's endless poetic moral capability for cathartic self-transformation by creating new self-narratives in response to others.

The word "tension" comes from the Greek *teinein* meaning, most of all, "to stretch." We have encountered this term in a number of ways. Ricoeur speaks of the will's ethical *in*tentionality: its capability literally for "stretching out" its narrative world in response to the irreducible demands of the other. Nussbaum describes phronesis as *at*tention: "stretching toward" others in their concrete narrative particularity. While MacIntyre does not explicitly use any cognates of *teinein* in his moral thought, we could say he underlines the need for a certain moral *re*tension: a "stretching back" of selfhood into a more meaningful and coherent inhabitation of a moral tradition. These moral tensions collectively suggest what Augustine long ago called the human capability for *distensio animi*: the "stretching apart" of the soul beyond its simple and immediate experience and into the rich and complex fullness of narrative time.[40] If MacIntyre emphasizes stretching into the past, Nussbaum toward others in the here and now, and Ricoeur toward the new, what they hold in common as essential to phronesis is the practice of constituting moral tensions into larger possibilities for narrative meaning.[41]

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[40] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), bk. 11, chap. 20.

[41] This parallel with Augustine could be taken further with respect to Nussbaum in that both describe this tension under the aegis of "perception": Augustine's narrative perception of the unfolding "present of the present" and Nussbaum's perception of the presence of others. Ricoeur explicitly takes up Augustine on this point through his three volumes of *Time and Narrative*.



Let us not hesitate to add that tension is fundamental to the poetic moral problem of tragedy and Aristotle's observation in the *Poetics* that tragedy induces catharsis. Freud was clearly pointing in such a direction in his psychological reading of the story of Antigone's father, Oedipus, who symbolizes the primal libidinal moral tensions of children with their parents. As Irigaray has pointed out, in fact, Antigone's need to bury her brother Polyneices could be said to reenact an unconscious cathartic need properly to bury Oedipus, who through incest is not only Antigone's father but also her brother too.[42] The tragedy, from this angle, is that Antigone needs to put to rest once and for all, even if at the cost of her own blood, the dark and tragic tensions at the heart of her family story. What kind of practical wisdom, as exhorted by the play's chorus, can bring catharsis out of such primal human tensions?

Phronesis is faced, most profoundly, with the task of narrating the self's own moral world within the situation of its already having been narrated. It is best described as a strange and powerful capability for weaving together the hidden and unhidden multitude of already given dimensions of one's moral condition into an ever more radically inclusive narrative meaning. Like art and literature, phronesis begins with a diversity of always already constituted "materials"—personal, historical, and intersubjective—and rather than simply reordering these materials themselves, or reducing them to abstract generalities, it creates on their basis something new and hitherto unimagined. It is because the self's moral realities exist in tension both with one another and with one's own moral self-understanding that the self is called poetically to produce its own moral meaning ever anew.

In this case, we may return to Aristotle and say that phronesis is in the end both "an end in itself" and, poetically, "an end other than itself." These teleological ends are joined by the activity of moral narration. Poetic phronesis pursues at once a narrative already told—a narrative whose realism makes it an ongoing end in itself—and a narrative still in the process of being produced—one that is also other than itself. The phronetic capability is for rendering the tensions of one's given moral situation and one's yet unmet larger moral possibilities productive of greater narrative coherency. This narrative end is at once *narrated by* one's given historical situation and yet, paradoxically, *to be narrated* anew, to be "stretched" in as yet unknown

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[42] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

directions. The end in itself of an ongoingly coherent ethical narrative is also an end other than itself of a narrative always in the process of being formed. Poetic phronesis so understood is a practical wisdom of unceasing but not ungrounded narrative self-creation.

Most sharply of all, however, poetic phronesis is driven by the self's narrative tensions with others. As Richard Kearney has said, "the human self has a narrative identity based on the multiple stories it recounts to and receives from others."[43] Not only does one's narrative world transform over time as a matter of course, but it *must* be transformed in moral terms because it inherently marginalizes and does violence to others in their otherness. The other is both a particular storied other self, as Nussbaum argues, and at the very same time another who also narrates his own identity in ways that are irreducible to any story the self may tell of it. This other's meaning, as Gabriel Marcel says, is ultimately and implicitly a "mystery" that one could never fully capture or predict.[44] Or, as Levinas says, it is transcendental: forever beyond any possible present interpretation of it.[45] Yet poetic phronesis can approach this disorienting moral situation with the capability for stretching out toward the other by creating *more* inclusive narratives. In this case, poetic phronesis consists in narrating the meaning of one's own moral world in such a way as to become ever more open to its also being narrated by others.

The "end other than itself" of such a practice of poetic phronesis is a kind of narrative inclusiveness that always beckons from the future, never ultimately reducible to any particular self's creation of it in the narrative here and now. Aristotle more or less assumed that human moral ends were already inclusively formed within a right understanding of human nature. However, Greek tragic poetry shows that this was not true even within the relatively small and stable world of the Greek *polis*. Phronesis must deal with the tragic tensions by which lives and communities are torn apart, including the most profound moral tension of self and other as irreducibly self-creating others. Phronesis is faced with an endless end: the creation of moral narratives ever more inclusive of what they cover up. This is a

[43] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[44] Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, trans. G. S. Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960).
[45] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).



profoundly tragic task from which none of us can escape. No received moral tradition or fine-tuned attentiveness to others can relieve us of the ultimate cathartic necessity for creating our moral worlds ever anew.

Such a concept of poetic phronesis clearly takes Aristotle in uniquely contemporary directions that Aristotle himself could never have imagined. I submit, however, that it works out some of Aristotle's own deepest presuppositions, even if it also adds to them. Today we are perhaps more sharply faced with the tensional dimensions of moral life, living as we do not in relatively self-contained city-states but in an era of global terrorism, economic oppression, rapid technological advance, community fragmentation, and a heightened sense of cultural pluralism. It would be a mistake, in my view, to revive Aristotelian phronesis from its premodern past as a way of rehabilitating concrete standards within our changing world. A more useful response to our fractured times is to recognize the unique human poetic capability for narrating one's own moral world anew both with and in response to others. This narrative and transformative moral possibility has been gradually obscured over Western intellectual history as ethics and poetics have been assumed to occupy largely separate spheres of activity. It may be time to overcome this division with an inconclusive poetic responsibility which, while unsatisfying to our anxiety for fixed moral values or principles, may ultimately prove more rewarding and more human.

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