

# Phronesis, meta-emotions, and character education

## Phrónesis, metaemociones y educación del carácter

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### Abstract:

Despite the recent interest in *phronesis* (practical wisdom), and the creation of a four-componential model to unpack its nature, various puzzles (philosophical, psychological, and educational) remain about those components, not least the proposed one of *emotion regulation*. This paper introduces four remaining puzzles about this component and provides a brief overview of possible responses, based on Aristotle's texts. However, given Aristotle's own naturalistic method, in which ethical theorising must be constantly updated in light of empirical findings, the paper suggests that Aristotle's texts only take us thus far and that we need to draw on contemporary psychological sources for further enlightenment. The paper therefore invokes research from the last quarter of a century about so-called *meta-emotions*. This research is relevant given the meta-status of *phronesis* as an inte-

grative virtue. Some of the possible implications of this research for an understanding of the emotional component of *phronesis* are elicited, as well as how it can be cultivated as part of character education.

**Keywords:** *phronesis*, meta-emotions, emotion regulation, emotional cultivation, character education.

### Resumen:

Pese al reciente interés en la *phrónesis* ('sabiduría práctica') y a la creación de un modelo de cuatro componentes para desentrañar su naturaleza, todavía quedan por resolver algunos interrogantes (filosóficos, psicológicos y educativos) sobre estos últimos, principalmente con el propuesto sobre la «regulación de las emociones». Este artículo plantea cuatro interrogantes pendientes sobre este componente y ofrece una breve

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descripción de posibles respuestas a partir de los textos de Aristóteles. Sin embargo, dado el método naturalista que empleaba el propio filósofo, según el cual la teorización ética debe actualizarse de forma constante a la luz de los hallazgos empíricos, el artículo sugiere que los textos aristotélicos ya no nos permiten avanzar más y que, para ampliar nuestros conocimientos, tenemos que servirnos de fuentes psicológicas contemporáneas. Por lo tanto, se ha recurrido a la investigación realizada en el último cuarto de siglo sobre las

«metaemociones», de gran importancia dado el metaestado de la *phrónesis* como virtud integradora. Se han identificado algunas de las posibles implicaciones de esta investigación para la comprensión del componente emocional de la *phrónesis*, así como la forma en que puede cultivarse como parte de la educación del carácter.

**Descriptores:** *phrónesis*, metaemociones, regulación de las emociones, cultivo emocional, educación del carácter.

## 1. Introduction

Neo-Aristotelian character or virtue education has been undergoing a revival of late in Europe and elsewhere in the world, either as a form of values/moral education (Jubilee Centre, 2022) or part of citizenship education focused on the development of civic virtues (Peterson, 2020). In part motivated by a new international policy-drive towards seeing flourishing (*eudaimonia* in Aristotle's sense) as the ultimate aim of education (Bernal, & Naval, 2023), this new-found interest has led to the establishment of a European Character and Virtue Association, with a journal in the pipeline.

In Aristotle's ethical and educational system, the lynchpin of a flourishing life, actualising the virtues and representing good character, is the overarching meta-virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom): an intellectual virtue that guides the moral and civic

virtues<sup>1</sup> towards their goals and solves possible conflicts between them as an integrator and adjudicator. In that sense, *phronesis* is best understood as excellence in ethical decision-making (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024). It is somewhat mysterious, however, that, until recently, much less was written about *phronesis* as a meta-virtue than about the underlying primary virtues in philosophical and educational circles; and, until 2019, no psychological conceptualisation of *phronesis* existed, nor any instrument to measure its efficacy (Darnell et al., 2019). This lacuna is particularly striking within education where advice about how to cultivate *phronesis*, in schools or universities, has been in short supply (Kristjánsson, 2021). Explanations given for this academic void range from Aristotle's own reticence about *phronesis* cultivation to the fact that *phronesis* is a more complex construct than, say, a "simple" moral virtue like gratitude.

In any case, the last 3-4 years have witnessed a sudden burst of interest in *phronesis* and *phronesis* development within philosophy, psychology, and education, with a number of partly overlapping constructs of *phronesis* being created (De Caro et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2021; Fowers et al., 2021; Kristjánsson et al., 2021; Darnell et al., 2022). There is no space here for comparisons and contrasts between all the different constructs. Rather, in this paper I focus exclusively on the four-componential model of *phronesis* to which I have contributed along with various colleagues in psychology and education. While the development of that model has now become the topic of a large book (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024), it is far from being the case that all puzzles surrounding *phronesis* and *phronesis* education have been settled. The present paper explores four puzzles relating to one of the proposed components of *phronesis*: that of emotion regulation.

In section 2, I explain our current neo-Aristotelian reconstruction of the *phronesis* concept, with a special focus on its emotion-regulatory function, and I introduce the four remaining puzzles. I provide a brief overview of possible responses to those puzzles based on Aristotle's texts. However, given Aristotle's own naturalistic method, in which ethical theorising must be constantly updated in light of empirical findings about "what we do and how we live" (Aristotle, 1985, p. 290 [1179a20-23]), I suggest that his texts only take us thus far and that we need to draw on contemporary psychological sources for further enlightenment. In section 3,

I therefore introduce research from the last quarter of a century about so-called «meta-emotions», of great relevance given the meta-status of *phronesis* as an integrative virtue. I elicit some of the possible implications of this research for our understanding of the emotional function of *phronesis* and how it can be cultivated as part of character education.

By necessity, this paper is very much exploratory and does not propose definitive answers to all the puzzles. While the goal is obviously to enhance the credentials of a neo-Aristotelian model of *phronesis* by strengthening an understanding of the relationship between *phronesis* and our emotional lives, it must be noted from the start that this is, as far as I know, the first paper written specifically about *phronesis* and emotions, at least in the Anglophone world.<sup>2</sup> As constituting the first word about many of the remaining puzzles, it would be overly ambitious to expect this paper to offer the last word.

## 2. A neo-Aristotelian *phronesis* model, and its emotional component

Many of the recent writings mentioned above grapple with, and try to finesse, what tends to be known as the Aristotelian "standard model" of *phronesis* (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024, chaps. 1-2). We know from Aristotle's texts about *phronesis*, and the more general contours of his virtue ethics, that the best course of action, at which *phronesis* aims, is the one that tracks the "golden mean" of an individual virtue (hits the bull's eye like an

archer's arrow) or finds the medial over-all way of reacting when there is a conflict between virtues. We also know that *phronesis* performs various functions; and the best way to convey that in contemporary psychological language is to say that the construct is made up of various (inter-related) components. I assume in what follows, in line with previous writings (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson et al., 2021), that these are four. The four-componential version of the "standard model" constitutes a pragmatic hypothesis. It does not aim at unearthing essential structures of the human mind. The aim is simply to identify what roles *phronesis* is called upon to perform and how those can best be characterised for explanatory purposes and, subsequently, for purposes of development and measurement.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the components do not refer to psycho-moral capacities that are completely independent of one another and can be turned "up" or "down" in isolation; rather, they are inter-related as explained below (see further in Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024, chap. 2).

### 2.1. Constitutive function/component

*Phronesis* involves the cognitive discriminatory ability to perceive the ethically salient aspects of a situation and to appreciate these as calling for specific kinds of responses. In the *phronimoi* (people possessing *phronesis*) this becomes a cognitive excellence in that, after having noted a salient moral feature of a concrete situation calling for a response, they will be able to weigh different considerations and see that, say, courage is required when the risk to one's life is not overwhelming

but the object at stake is extremely valuable; or that honesty is required when one has wronged a friend. We could also refer to this function as "moral sensitivity" or "moral perception", in order to link it more directly to the standard moral psychology/education literatures.

### 2.2. Emotional regulative function/component

Individuals foster their emotional well-being through *phronesis* by harmonising their emotional responses with their understandings of the ethically salient aspects of their situation, their judgement, and their recognition of what is at stake in the moment. This is both because they will have already acquired habituated virtues, that is, have shaped their emotions in ways that motivate them to behave as the virtuous person would, and also because having formed these habits and consolidated them through understanding and reasoning, they will have a robust intellectual basis for them. For example, a *phronimos* might recognise that her appraisal of the situation is problematic, giving rise to an emotional response that is inappropriate to the situation. The emotion-regulative function can then help her adjust her emotion by, for instance, giving herself an inner "talking to" or asking herself questions about what is prompting the ill-fitting emotional response. For this reason, we can also refer to this function, in a more standard Aristotelian way, as infusing emotion with reason. Since this is the component that is specifically under discussion in the present paper, I return to it later in this section.

### 2.3. Blueprint function/component

The synthesising work of *phronesis* operates in conjunction with the agent's overall understanding of the kinds of things that matter for a flourishing life: the agent's own ethical aims and aspirations, her understanding of what it takes to live and act well, and her need to live up to the standards that shape and are shaped by her understanding and experience of what matters. This amounts to what we call a blueprint of flourishing. A "blueprint" has more similarity to what psychologists call "moral identity" than a full-blown theoretical outline of the good life. *Phronetic* persons possess a general justifiable conception of the good life (*eudaimonia*) and adjust their overall reactions to that blueprint, thus furnishing it with motivational force. This does not mean that each ordinary person needs to have the same sophisticated comprehension of the "grand end" of human life as a philosopher might have, in order to count as possessing *phronesis*. Rather than being an "elite sport", the sort of grasp of a blueprint of the aims of human life informing *phronesis* is within the grasp of the ordinary well-brought-up individual. It draws upon the person's standpoint on life as a whole and determines the place that different goods occupy in the larger context.

### 2.4. Integrative function/component

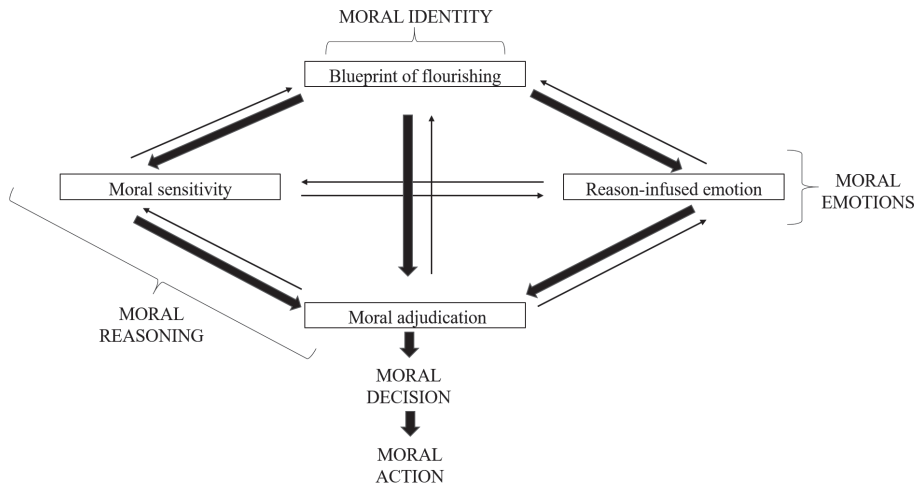
Let us assume that we have identified a moral problem correctly as one potentially requiring input from two apparently conflicting moral vir-

tues. Let us further assume that we have infused our relevant emotions with reason and that they are not obstructing the decision process. Finally, let us assume that we have a clear, non-self-deceptive identity of who we want to be (a blueprint of the good life) and an overall motivation to bring our reactions into line with that identity. That leaves just the final component of the four-componential construct: the integrative one, which we could also call its adjudicative function or, in line with standard moral psychology, denote as a form of "moral reasoning". Through this component, an individual integrates different virtue-relevant considerations, via a process of checks and balances, especially in circumstances where different ethically salient considerations, or different kinds of virtues or values, appear to be in conflict and agents need to negotiate dilemmatic space.

Figure 1 illustrates the overall conceptualisation of *phronesis*. Notice that I try to couch the components there in a language that will be more familiar to social scientists (entirely capitalised words) than the names of the four func-

Now, a long paper could be written about each of the above components and problems that they present (philosophically, psychologically, and not least educationally). However, this paper focuses on the emotional component only. This component remains problematic in many ways, both exegetically and practically.

FIGURE 1. A Neo-Aristotelian model of wise (phronetic) moral decision-making.



### 2.5. The four puzzles

Here is a quick description of four puzzles relating to the relationship between *phronesis* and emotions:

1. Is it really the case that there is an emotion-regulation component inherent in Aristotelian *phronesis*, and if there is, why does he not say anything explicitly about it himself?
2. Does *phronesis*, as a whole, include an emotional motivation or is all of its motivational force derived from the moral virtues that it is meant to synthesise/integrate?
3. If there is a distinct emotional motivation tied to *phronesis*, does it fall under Aristotle's account of a unique pleasure attached to virtuously achieved motivations? In other words, is there a unique *phronesis*-satisfaction pleasure?

4. How do we solve the problem of the “mysteriously missing emotional motivation” in Aristotle, namely the motivation stemming from the virtue that plays second fiddle after the *phronetic* decision, for example in a case where *phronesis* adjudicates honesty over loyalty? According to Aristotle, the virtuous person achieves emotional harmony without suppressing emotions, so what happens to the original “loyalty-prompting” motivation?

Let me now elaborate upon those problems and offer some initial clues about their solution from Aristotle's texts. As we will see, those do not offer clear-cut answers and more work needs to be done, which I undertake in section 3. To begin with first puzzle, it must be noted that Aristotle does not mention emotions at all in his specific sections on *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1985). However, he does remind us that to understand

the workings of *phronesis*, “we must begin from a little further back” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 168 [1144a12-14]); i.e., we must recall *inter alia* what has already been said about the moral virtues and how *phronesis* does not get off the ground without effectively habituated moral virtues being in place already in the agent’s developmental trajectory. Now it so happens that most of those moral virtues incorporate a clear emotional component that motivates them. More than that, Aristotle does have a well-developed account of the nature of emotions and their role in the good life. He explains their ontology, epistemology, and moral standing. Space only allows a summary rehearsal of those features.

Regarding the *ontological* question (although Aristotle is not always fully consistent on this) every emotion seems to have a perceptual, cognitive (thought), sensory (feeling) and behavioural component (see Kristjánsson, 2018, chap. 1). Debates rage in contemporary emotion theory about which of those four components essentially defines an emotion; but it is as if Aristotle anticipated those debates with his argument that an emotion needs a combination of all four to emerge. Epistemologically, regarding the thorny question of whether emotions track or create value, Aristotle again offers a conciliatory position, which could be termed “soft rationalism” (Kristjánsson, 2018, chap. 2), according to which emotions essentially record already existing objective values but also help identify those in ways that reason alone cannot do,<sup>4</sup> and in some cases imbue objects and events with surplus value.

Aristotle is most detailed and explicit when he talks about the “morality” of emotions. Emotional dispositions can, no less than action dispositions, have an “intermediate and best condition [...] proper to virtue”: a condition in which the relevant emotions are felt “at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end and in the right way” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 44 [1106b17-35]). If a relevant emotion is “too intense or slack” for its present object, we are badly off in relation to it, but if it is intermediate, we are “well off” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 41 [1105b26-28]). And persons can be fully virtuous only if they are regularly disposed to experience emotions in this medial way. This theory ties in with Aristotle’s teleological assumption of psycho-social homeostasis, according to which the parts of the human soul are arranged such that it may adjust successfully to the various social situations in which individuals will find themselves, *inter alia* by adopting medial emotional states of character (see further in Kristjánsson, 2007, chap. 4). In the case of emotion, the mediality (in the sense of neither being too intense nor too slack, too wide or too narrow, etc.) refers to (a) occasions, (b) objects, (c) people, (d) motive (i.e., goal), and (e) way (i.e., degree).

It is clear from this text that, to achieve its integrative aim, *phronesis* needs to engage in considerable emotion regulation; hence the invocation of the ‘emotion-regulative function’ in the above neo-Aristotelian model. Because ‘emotion regulation’ in

psychology has sometimes been seen as equivalent to ‘emotional control’, or more specifically to the cognitive policing of wayward non-cognitive emotions, it is easy to understand why this function of *phronesis* may be misunderstood by some psychologists to involve emotional suppression, or to invoke an outdated reason-emotion dichotomy. Nothing is further from the truth, however, as Aristotelians understand emotion regulation in terms of the “reason-infusion” of emotions rather than the suppression of emotion by reason.<sup>5</sup> Yet because Aristotle talks about this at the level of individual virtues/emotions only and does not have at his disposal the general contemporary constructs of “meta-emotion” and “emotional schemas” that I introduce in section 3, puzzle 1, is not fully resolved.

This brings us straight to puzzle 2. It is clear in Aristotle’s account that *phronesis* depends, developmentally and logically, on emotionally charged motivations derived from the individual moral virtues.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that the emotional motivations *phronesis* feeds on from those virtues may lead in conflicting directions (e.g., the pain of sympathy may clash with pleasure of satisfied indignation when an evildoer receives comeuppance), or the evoked emotions may be disproportionate to a holistic assessment of the situation. An implication of this, insofar as emotions are our prime motivational anchors, is that the *phronimos*’ emotions must be in harmony with her rational judgement and overall virtuous outlook (“blueprint”) and motivate her to behave accordingly. Precisely be-

cause of the blueprint component, *phronesis* is thus not only about resolving tricky particularist situations, but about what “promotes living well in general” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 153 [1140a25-28]).<sup>7</sup> For morality, like medicine, “there is a ruling [science]” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 159 [1141b22-23]). More specifically, this science is encapsulated in the ungrounded grounder of virtue ethics, the conception of human flourishing and, through the blueprint component, in how the agent identifies with such a conception for herself.

The blueprint component may thus seem to contain the solution to puzzle 2 about *phronesis* and emotions: whether it is itself a source of moral motivation or whether it simply feeds on motivations drawn from the moral virtues that it synthesises. The answer in the model presented above is *both*. The *phronimos*’ primary source of moral motivation continues to be derived from the specific moral virtues. For example, she acts honestly primarily because of the motivational component of the virtue of honesty. However, that primary motivation is reinforced and shaped by the overall blueprint motivation of the agent to be an honest person. This secondary *phronetic* motivation is brought into sharper relief when there is a conflict between virtues: say, when both honesty and loyalty are motivating the person in the same situation but where those motivations seem to call for opposite reactions. Then the secondary background motivation derived from the blueprint component becomes crucial. It demands



coherence and prompts the agent to seek for the golden mean of reaction that best accords with her sense of who she is and wants to be overall as a person.

While this solution seems to cohere with the spirit, if not the letter, of Aristotle's account, it remains psychologically underdeveloped. What is the exact nature of the secondary motivation; how is it related to some kind of secondary emotion; and how does that emotion-motivation dyad develop through possible feedback loops derived from *phronetic* decisions regarding emotional motivations stemming from individual virtues? We need to draw on modern conceptualisations to come closer to solving puzzle 2 (see section 3).

The third puzzle arises because of a strange discrepancy between what Aristotle says about the sensory nature of virtues versus mere emotions. Aristotle observes about virtue that a pleasure peculiar to each virtuous activity will supervene upon and complete that activity once it has been successfully accomplished (Aristotle, 1985, pp. 277-278 [1175a22-28]). It is tempting to hypothesise that he held the same view with regard to emotions: namely, that a sensation peculiar to each emotion accompanies that emotion. However, nothing in Aristotle's account of emotions supports this hypothesis. In the *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 2007), pleasure and pain accompanying emotions are regarded as mere sensations, not as intentional states with cognitive content. To be sure, different pleasant emotions are ex-

perienced differently, but that is because of their different cognitive consorts and goal-directed activities, not because the pleasant sensations accompanying them vary in kind.

One way to explain this apparent discrepancy is to point out that the behavioural component of an emotion (like gratitude) is a mere suggestion or a prompt. For instance, with gratitude, you feel good and want to do something good in return (which you may or may not be able to do). That pleasant feeling may be phenomenologically indistinguishable from pleasant feelings accompanying other positively valenced emotions such as joy. However, once you have taken a decision to express the gratitude and have done so successfully, you experience a unique pleasure characteristic of that accomplishment, as the icing on the cake of the virtuous activity. The crucial question then arises whether a pleasant feeling supervenes upon all *phronetic* decisions and, more specifically, whether that feeling is a general feeling of satisfaction (as with positive emotions) or a discrete feeling, unique to *phronesis* (as with virtuous actions). To answer that question, we need to know more than Aristotle tells us about how exactly emotion is implicated in *phronetic* decisions (recall puzzles 1 and 2).

The final puzzle 4 relates to Aristotle's claim that reason (as embodied in *phronesis*) does not suppress emotion, in conjunction with the claim that the *phronetic* agent is fully motivationally unified. Now, it seems to be a common

understanding that in some cases of *phronetic* decision-making one virtue will simply overrule another; for instance, we decide to prioritise honesty over loyalty to a friend who has committed some misdemeanour. What happens, then, to the emotionally charged motivation to value loyalty? Either it has been suppressed or not. If it has been suppressed, that violates Aristotle's claim about *phronesis* not suppressing emotion. If it has not been suppressed, it must somehow linger on, which seems to violate Aristotle's claim about the *phronimos*' complete psychological unity. I have referred to this earlier as 'the mystery of the missing motivation'; and my inclination has been simply to modify or even reject Aristotle's claim that the *phronimos* is fully psycho-morally unified (Kristjánsson, 2010; cf. Carr, 2009). However, in default of a clearer picture of the relationship between *phronesis* and emotions, it is difficult to ascertain whether we may have missed a trick here. Is there some more advanced account of emotional homeostasis at hand that could make sense of and accommodate Aristotle's apparently contrasting claims?

### 3. Contemporary work on meta-emotions and related concepts: Implications for the four puzzles and for efforts at emotion-centred character education

Couched in modern psychological language, not available to Aristotle, *phronesis* is a meta-cognitive capacity. However, with respect to its proposed emotion-regulative component/function, another recent psy-

chological concept may be even more relevant, namely that of meta-emotions.

Gottman and colleagues coined the term "meta-emotion" in a 1996 paper for the purpose of conceptualising and predicting what they call "parental meta-emotion philosophy", which refers to an organized set of feelings and thoughts about one's own emotions and one's children's emotions' (Gottman et al., 1996, p. 243). In short, meta-emotions are (secondary) meta-level emotions about (primary) object-level emotions.<sup>8</sup> For example, I may feel anxious or sad about my own anger, which I deem unreasonable, or proud of my guilt about a misdeed I committed, as I deem the guilt the correct moral response. Gottman et al.'s original aim was to search for the correlates of parental attitudes towards their children's emotions (dismissing/derogatory versus accepting/encouraging), and indeed they found the predicted links between these parental attitudes and various positive or negative outcomes for the children. Somewhat unfortunately, for the purposes of the present paper, the vast majority of research projects on meta-emotions still focus on psychodynamics and psychopathologies, especially within families; there are not many forays into moral, characterological, or educational spheres. Another implication of the relative bloatedness of Gottman et al.'s original definition is that conceptions of the concept have remained somewhat broad and vague, and it is sometimes not clear that theorists are working with the same concept. Again, for present purposes, it helps to clarify and narrow down the

features of the concept that might be most useful for us.

First, while Gottman and colleagues (1996) used the term to target broadly both “feelings and thoughts about emotions”, mere thoughts about emotions seem to be covered well by the existing term “meta-cognition”, so what we want to home in on here are exclusively emotions about emotions. This distinction is not always crystal-clear, however, as emotions in Aristotle’s theory include a cognitive component (thought); and emotions and cognitions have proven impossible to fully separate in psychological science.

Second, Gottman et al. (1996) were mainly interested in meta-emotions about other people’s emotions. However, I will, in what follows, confine the term to secondary emotions about one’s own object-level emotions.

Third, meta-emotions need to be distinguished from meta-moods (Norman & Furnes, 2016). Moods, as distinct from emotions, are typically defined as objectless emotional states. A person in a mood of melancholy is not sad about anything specific but rather suffers from an apparently objectless existential sadness. This standard definition creates a problem for the notion of a meta-mood, however, as it seems then to have become a logical impossibility. If moods are not about anything, a meta-mood “about” a primary mood cannot occur (Jäger & Bartsch, 2006). It may be more apt, therefore, to say that moods have vague, unspecific ob-

jects rather than no objects,<sup>9</sup> or that individuals may have emotional responses to their moods, as in impatience with one’s melancholy moods. The former would leave space, for example, for a melancholic meta-mood about how often I am in a melancholic mood, and the latter takes us back to a meta-emotion with a mood as its object. In any case, in this paper the lens is directed exclusively at meta-emotions in a stricter sense.

Fourth, a meta-emotion can either be the same as, or different from, the primary emotion. I can experience meta-anger about my own anger, but also meta-sadness about my anger. In the first kind of case, it can be difficult to distinguish between what is “meta” and what is “primary” in the emotional episode (Mendonça, 2016). Both these types of meta-emotions may be relevant for present concerns.

Fifth, meta-emotions can be felt simultaneous to the primary emotion or later (Mendonça, 2016). I may be embarrassed about my jealousy while I am feeling the jealousy or later when it has subsided (or both). If we think of meta-emotions in terms of *phronetic* emotional regulation, both types of occurrences may be of interest. Similarly, meta-emotions can constitute either an episodic state or a lasting trait (Norman & Furnes, 2016).

Sixth, meta-emotions are often discussed in terms of emotional reflexivity (e.g., Mendonça, 2013). Although that is a helpful conceptualisation, it must not be

conflated with another type of emotional reflexivity that is part and parcel of Aristotle's emotion theory. Aristotle talks a lot about Janus-faced (primary) emotions such as pride and shame that point both inwards (are about oneself) in a reflexive way and outwards, to external events and actions in which one is engaged (see Kristjánsson, 2018). This sort of primary reflexivity needs to be distinguished from meta-emotive reflexivity.

The recent literature on meta-emotions is not the only source of potential enlightenment for a neo-Aristotelian understanding of the emotion-regulative component of *phronesis*. There are also vast literatures on more general high-level emotional processes that guard and regulate an agent's emotional system as a whole (cf. Thomas et al., 2022). Most educationists will, for example, be familiar with the concept of "emotional intelligence". While that concept upholds the idea of a holistic order imposed on our emotional lives, as one would expect *phronesis* to do, Aristotelians tend to be wary of the concept as it is typically specified in psychological and educational circles,<sup>10</sup> because of its instrumentalist severance from any idea of a moral blueprint. A clever, manipulative cocaine baron can thus easily satisfy all the standard criteria of emotional intelligence (Kristjánsson, 2007, chap. 6). The concept of general "emotional schemas" is less loaded than that of "emotional intelligence", and it may carry a stronger appeal for Aristotelians. It is typically considered to include

a broad, inter-related range of beliefs and strategies regarding our emotional lives, including beliefs about causes and consequences of emotions, implications of emotional experiences on self-concept, and appropriate and effective means of regulation (Edwards & Wupperman, 2019).<sup>11</sup> As emotional schemas are conceptualised from a meta-cognitive perspective, they may seem to afford a convenient scientific way of making sense of the overall role that *phronesis* is meant to play, in Aristotelian theory, for our emotional lives.

### 3.1. Lessons to be learned

This quick overview of the state of the art in psychological theorising about meta-emotions and related constructs may help shed some light on the puzzles introduced in section 2 affecting the proposed emotion-regulative component of *phronesis*. Before exploring those lessons, I need to repeat that this is the first paper of which I know that looks at Aristotelian *phronesis* through the theoretical lens of meta-emotions; and what I offer below are thus very much initial, exploratory thoughts on the matter, to be (hopefully) further reflected upon and discussed.

#### 3.1.1. Puzzle 1

Insofar as puzzle 1 is an exegetical one, about Aristotle's silence on *phronesis* and emotions, the literature above obviously does not offer any help. However, insofar as it is a puzzle about how to make sense of the emotion-based tasks that *phronesis* is clearly required to take on in an Aristotelian model, the conceptualis-

ation of meta-emotions offers considerable clarity. As an initial observation, there seems to be no special difficulty in accounting for the ontology of meta-emotions in much the same way as Aristotle does for ordinary primary emotions. If we think of *phronesis* as offering a meta-emotional take on emotional virtue conflicts, for instance, the relevant meta-emotion requires *perception* (of the diverging emotions evoked by the situation in which, say, loyalty and honesty clash); *cognition* (thought about the emotional conflict); a *feeling* (of unease about the conflict) and a *behavioural suggestion* (about finding a way to solve the conflict).

Consider the hypothesis that, when one applies *phronesis* to a conflict situation between different virtuous emotions, there is a meta-emotion that kicks in (accompanying the blueprint component of *phronesis* which identifies the agent's ideal conception of a good life) and that tries to reconcile the conflicting primary emotions or, if necessary, prioritise one at the expense of the other. Judging from the current literature on meta-emotions, this seems to be a credible hypothesis, because the consensus in the literature is that meta-emotions have a regulatory function *vis-à-vis* primary emotions: indeed, they are considered to be the main instigators of emotion regulation (see, e.g., Norman & Furnes, 2016; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2019; Thomas et al., 2022). I return to this issue under puzzle 2.

There is another feature of the recent literature on meta-emotions that

relates to puzzle 1 and strengthens Aristotle's general model of *phronesis* as a decision-making process in the ethical sphere. This is the finding that those low in meta-emotional capacities are prone to adopt utilitarian calculations rather than virtue ethical ones to solve moral quandaries. As Aristotle might have predicted, a pattern of meta-emotional avoidance prevents agents from utilising emotion information that is critical for virtue-ethical decision-making (Koven, 2011). This finding may also heighten doubts about the possibility of transferring *phronetic* decision-making to automated AI-driven systems (Koutsikouri et al., 2023). At least at the moment, one of the primary deficiencies of such systems is emotional competence, and according to Aristotelian virtue ethics, such a lack will likely lead to over-reliance on instrumentalist utilitarian reasoning.

### 3.1.2. Puzzle 2

Turning to puzzle 2, the research on meta-emotions furnishes us with nothing less than an ideal conceptual repertoire to make sense of the solution tentatively ascribed to Aristotle earlier about the two layers of dynamically related emotional motivations driving *phronetic* task operations. While the primary motivation (say, towards honesty or loyalty) stems from the primary emotions accompanying the discrete virtues, the secondary meta-emotion (which tracks overall harmony of action choices with the agent's blueprint of a good life) regulates the primary emotions by magnifying, rec-

onciling, attenuating, or even reversing them (cf. Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2019). At the same time, the meta-emotionally overseen choices feed back into and can lead to revisions of the agent's ongoing moral identity and hence the overarching meta-emotion. Individual deliberative choices thus lead to constant ongoing, if subtle, changes in the overall *phronetic* system. Not only does this account satisfy the understandable demand from psychologists that the *phronesis* model be explicated in a language derived from empirical research (e.g., Lapsley, 2021), it also adds grist to the mill of those philosophers who argue that an Aristotle-derived *phronesis* model will be anti-Humean about motivation: i.e., it will not assume that all moral decision-making is eventually based on non-deliberative desires, as Hume did, because the blueprint function requires deliberation (see further in Kristjánsson, 2018, chaps. 1-2).

### 3.1.3. Puzzle 3

Is there a unique *phronesis*-satisfaction pleasure? Although the meta-emotion literature does not answer that question directly, as it never mentions *phronesis*, it does go some distance towards offering an Aristotle-sounding hypothesis about the relationship between *phronesis* and positively or negatively valenced feelings. *Qua* emotion, according to Aristotle at least, the meta-emotion driving *phronesis* will not be phenomenologically unique. It will simply present itself as painful when the primary virtuous emotions are in conflict or cannot, for some reason, be behavioural

ly executed, but pleasant when a solution has been found.<sup>12</sup> When a *phronetic* decision has been made and an action instigated successfully, there might be a case for arguing that a unique pleasure emerges (the pleasure of successfully enacted *phronesis*) which would then be a pleasure “celebrating” the whole meta-cognitive system (all the four components) rather than just the relevant meta-emotion. There may also be a case for an alternative hypothesis. Someone could argue, in line with Occam's razor, that it suffices to assume that the unique pleasure will be the one accompanying the overriding virtue in each particular case. So, for example, if *phronesis* decides to prioritise honesty over loyalty to a friend, the pleasure peculiar to the enacted decision, if it works out well, will be the pleasure unique to honesty and, *mutatis mutandis*, for loyalty if the decision went in its favour. Which one of these two hypotheses is more accurate needs to be established through empirical research that does not exist today.

### 3.1.4. Puzzle 4

The literature on meta-emotions does not solve “the mystery of the missing motivation”. Jäger and Bartsch (2006) may be right that the construct of meta-emotions helps elucidate cases of emotional ambivalence, but it does not explain how the *phronimos* overcomes them. We are probably stuck, therefore, either with the earlier-mentioned recourse of downplaying Aristotle's insistence on the motivational unity of the *phronimos* (see further in Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024, chap. 10),<sup>13</sup>

or trying to argue (like Calhoun, 1995) that motivational integrity is compatible with ambivalence and does not imply complete wholeheartedness.<sup>14</sup> The related literature on “emotional schemas” may hold greater promise of explaining how adaptive and coherent emotional schemas can be, ideally, developed (e.g., Edwards & Wupperman, 2019), but, at the moment, it is not very explicit on ways in which to achieve this.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, in this case at least, we would be best advised to leave Aristotle behind completely and draw on other historical sources that offer less rigid conceptualisations of emotional unity. For instance, Leung (2023) has recently argued that neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi provides a more plausible account than Aristotle’s of how emotional harmony can be achieved without full motivational unity in Aristotle’s sense.<sup>16</sup>

All in all, the recent conceptualisation of meta-emotion and related constructs adds considerable psychological backbone to the neo-Aristotelian *phronesis* model explained in section 2 by allowing us to frame the account of the emotion-regulative component in state-of-the-art psychological language and helping us, at least, think more clearly about some of the remaining puzzles.

### 3.1.5. Character education and emotional cultivation

It is well-known that neo-Aristotelian character education (Jubilee Centre, 2022) cannot get going without the cultivation of virtuous emotions; and at the early stages at least, it is predominantly about emotional sensitisation and inter-

nalisation (Kristjánsson, 2018, chap. 9). Until now, most of the educational literature on emotion education, within a characterological framework, has been about early-years education. This may be partly a reflection of the developmental priority of emotions in the early years, but also partly because of the unfortunate lacuna, mentioned at the outset, about *phronesis* education in general. The recent input from psychology aids us in articulating the tasks of emotion education, as part of character education, more systematically and scientifically than before.<sup>17</sup>

As I see it, the task for the character-education-inspired emotion educator can be divided up into four parts or phases, which partly follow a young person’s developmental trajectory.

First, something Aristotle does not mention because the relevant conceptualisation was not available to him, and I have not mentioned in this paper either because it precedes *phronesis* development, is the development of the student’s “empathy”: the capacity to understand, and possibly identify with, others’ emotional states. While not a full-blown emotion in itself, empathy is often considered to constitute the developmental precursor of most other-regarding emotions, be those primary or secondary.<sup>18</sup> Acknowledging this consideration, Svenaeus (2014) argues persuasively that *phronesis* must “be ‘rooted’ in empathy” (p. 295). He overdoes it, however, when he further argues that empathy “is the feeling component of

phronesis” (p. 296). As argued above, the main affective component of *phronesis* is a meta-emotion, more complex and multi-faceted than empathy and emerging later in the developmental trajectory. That said, it is not far-fetched to conjecture that empathy can be applied, for measurement purposes, as one of the proxies for *phronesis*, and it has indeed been used in such a way in the past (Darnell et al., 2022).

Second, the bread and butter of character education, especially in the early stages, is the habituation of the individual virtues, including their emotional components of virtuous emotions. This is, indeed, what most of the emotion-education literature has been about, and there is no shortage of available pedagogical strategies (Kristjánsson, 2018, chap. 9).

Third, given the thrust of the present paper, we need to help students develop the meta-emotion that *phronesis* needs to perform its emotion-regulative function. While there is no doubt something to learn here from the developmental literatures on emotional regulation more generally (Kristjánsson, 2018, chap. 9) and meta-cognitions (Norman & Furnes, 2016), there does not exist, to the best of my knowledge, any specific literature on this in the context of a model of Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian *phronesis*.<sup>19</sup> This is, in other words, an area that cries out for input from character educationists and character educators.

Fourth and finally, there is the honing and finessing of the whole *phronesis*

system, insofar as it adjudicates and incorporates emotions. This is a far bigger task than that of developing one *phronetic* meta-emotion; it has to do with the consolidation and regulation of a holistic emotional system. The more general research available on emotional intelligence and emotional schemas will no doubt be useful, in this regard, although I have already pointed out some shortcomings of that work. However, again, I suggest this as still mostly uncharted territory for emotion-based character education aimed at cultivating *phronesis*.

#### 4. Final comment

To sum up, *phronesis* is about complex ethical decision-making, guided by emotionally driven motivations. Whether philosophers like it or not, some of the most important research in this area in the last decades has been conducted within empirical science in general and psychology in particular. The naturalistic revisions of virtue-ethical work, which Aristotle himself called for, cannot be done without drawing on resources provided by psychology. Similarly for educationists, interested in character education in general and the cultivation of virtuous emotions in particular, an obvious place to start is to draw lessons from recent research into meta-constructs such as meta-emotions and how those lessons can be applied to the development of *phronesis*: the virtue that ultimately matters most for good character.



## Acknowledgement

I am grateful for helpful comments by Blaine Fowers on an earlier draft.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I focus exclusively in this paper on the moral virtues in relation to *phronesis*. However, it is clear that *phronesis* also integrates the civic virtues (Aristotle, 1944; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024, chap. 8).

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that two Spanish scholars, Consuelo Martínez-Priego and Ana Romero-Iribas, are in the process of writing a paper about the same topic, albeit not from an exclusively neo-Aristotelian perspective, and I have benefited from correspondence with them. They are interested *inter alia* in the issue of how emotions facilitate *phronetic* decisions via neuroendocrine activation: an exciting topic but outside my field of expertise.

<sup>3</sup> From a structural point of view, and the point of conceptual parsimony, two of the components identified might better be seen as preconditions than constituents of *phronesis*. The only essential components would, then, be the constitutive and integrative ones, as delineated presently. This would mean that the emotional component under exploration here would be reduced to a precondition of *phronesis*. Nevertheless, from a pragmatic perspective (as the two “preconditions” are necessary for *phronesis* to function) I include them as components.

<sup>4</sup> As Mendonça (2016, p. 51) puts it (although she is not describing Aristotle’s soft rationalism), emotions are “unique repositories of information about morality”.

<sup>5</sup> If emotion is not reason-infused in that way, it behaves “like over-hasty servants who run out before they have heard all the instructions, and then carry them out wrongly, or dogs who bark at any noise at all, before investigating to see if it is a friend” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 187 [1149a26-30]).

<sup>6</sup> This clearly distinguishes Aristotle’s account from the Aretai Center’s “Socratic model” suggested by De Caro et al. (2021), according to which all the virtues are subsumed under a master virtue (rather than a meta-virtue) of *phronesis* as general moral competence. Aristotle’s own complaint against

Socrates (about his account getting this the wrong way round, developmentally and logically) still applies here: “For in that he [Socrates] thought all the virtues are [instances of] *phronesis*, he was in error; but in that he thought they all require *phronesis*, he was right” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 170 [1144b, 18-21]; translation slightly amended).

<sup>7</sup> A detailed exploration of Aristotle’s concept of decision/choice (*prohairesis*), as the outcome of *phronesis*, also indicates that it typically refers to a decision about a general life-goal rather than a specific single-virtue-relevant decision (De Oliveira, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Philosophically minded readers will no doubt pick up on the possibility that there could then, logically at least, be meta-meta emotions about meta-emotions, and so forth *ad infinitum*. Psychologists are aware of this problem but do not seem overly concerned about it, as subjects rarely if ever report upon such third-level-or-higher emotions (cf. Mendonça, 2013, p. 392).

<sup>9</sup> It is well-known from the literature, also, how moods seek out objects and thus turn themselves into discrete emotions. For example, a person in a mood of grievance (increasingly pervasive in our times) will seek out objects and events, sometimes trivial, to complain about.

<sup>10</sup> In educational circles, emotional intelligence is a core concept underwriting so-called social and emotional learning (SEL).

<sup>11</sup> While the schema concept assumes is that there is some structure to a set of beliefs, cognitions, emotions, etc., the term does not say anything about the kind of structure, the nature of the components, or the relationships among the components. On its own, the concept of a schema is thus quite formal and empty. It needs filling in.

<sup>12</sup> As Martínez-Priego and Romero-Iribas (personal correspondence) put it, “emotions allow confirmation of the correctness of moral decision”.

<sup>13</sup> It is of course open to the Aristotelian to argue that if my adjudication guides me to prioritise one virtue over another, it will also help shape my emotional response, downregulating the virtue and emotion that are not prioritised. However, this does not make the de-prioritised virtue-related emotion or motivation disappear entirely, as Aristotle’s unity thesis seems to require, but they become part of a residual motivation, as a road not taken.

<sup>14</sup> The idea would then be, for example, that identities can be compartmentalised according to context without jeopardising integrity: e.g., defending lesbianism in one context but endorsing a fundamentalist religious stance against homosexuality in another.

<sup>15</sup> Because emotional schemas are partly shaped by culture (Edwards & Wupperman, 2019), *phronesis* education as part of character education needs to be more multiculturally sensitive than it has typically been, in the Aristotelian tradition. Lu Yun Chieh is currently working on a doctoral project on this topic within my research centre.

<sup>16</sup> Although there is no space to explore this paper in any detail here, I strongly recommend it to readers. In short, if we tried to accommodate Leung's (Zhu Xi-derived) solution to an Aristotelian *phronesis* framework, it would be even more optimistic than I have allowed myself to be about the possibility of subsuming conflicting emotions under the same principle and allowing both of them jointly to inform action choices.

<sup>17</sup> Not everyone will agree with this. See, e.g., David Carr's (2023) criticism of the 'psychologisation' of the *phronesis* discourse, explored and responded to in Kristjánsson and Fowers (2024, chap. 12).

<sup>18</sup> Notably, many developmental psychologists maintain that so-called basic emotions such as fear or anger precede empathy.

<sup>19</sup> Yet as a possible starting point, see the five steps suggested by Molewijk et al. (2011, p. 389) for an Aristotelian moral inquiry into emotions.

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