# ENGAGING PHRONESIS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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But what is *phronesis*? *Phronesis* (phronesis) is generally defined as practical wisdom or knowledge of the proper ends of life. In Aristotle's scheme, *phronesis* is classified as one of several 'intellectual virtues' or 'excellences of mind' (Eikeland, 2008). Aristotle (trans. 1975) distinguished *phronesis* from the two other intellectual virtues of *episteme* and *techne*. In Aristotle's conception, drawn below from Flyvbjerg (2001), *episteme* is characterised as scientific, universal, invariable, context-independent knowledge. The original concept is known today through the terms *epistemology* and *epistemic*. *Techne* is characterised as context-dependent, pragmatic, variable, craft knowledge and is oriented toward practical instrumental rationality governed by a conscious goal. The original concept appears today in terms such as *technique*, *technical*, and *technology*. *Phronesis*, on the other hand, is an intellectual virtue that implies ethics. It involves deliberation that is based on values, concerned with practical judgement and informed by reflection. It is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, and oriented toward action.

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

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

# PHRONESIS IN CONTEMPORARY PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: EMERGING THREADS AND JUXTAPOSITIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

that future conceptions of phronesis, should be 'worked together' with the concept of probability.

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

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

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

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

Frank points out that in health care, practitioners have two choices: to "look at the day as a big checklist and don't look back or even around ... as a way of getting through their day" (Frank, p. 57), or to engage in reflection. He draws attention to how, in professional practice, reflection often begins with interruption: "Reflection interrupts that flow. It is a carved-out space in which we ask ourselves what we're doing, and who is doing the things that seem to be getting done" (Frank, p. 54). Frank notes multiple claims on the health care practitioner, of which he names six: Practical claims address the expectation of an outcome from the consultation; professional claims that the practitioner will meet the expectations of peers, both institutionally and personally; scientific claims call on practitioners to act according to the science on which their practice is based, or to "have very good"

reasons for any deviation" (Frank, p. 56); commercial claims act on practitioners as employees, as investors and/or as owners of practices; ethical claims concern standards of practice, respect of patients, etc.; and moral claims call practitioners to moral actions, for example, witnessing the patient's suffering. A procedural checklist, he suggests, does little to address these claims; but it does (if set down as a protocol) diminish the responsibility of the practitioner, under the guise of accountability. Arthur Frank calls for a phronesis that involves relationship and a call to witness the patient's suffering. His preoccupation with the practitioner as 'witness' and his call to practitioners to respond to patients in the face of their suffering illuminate a relational emphasis in his practical wisdom.

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

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

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

Higgs observes that professional practice is characterised by the 'absence of certainty.' Recognition of the complexity and uncertainty of practice is a theme that permeates this book and is reminiscent of the classic metaphor of the swamp used by Schön to illuminate the nature of practice. Phronesis, it seems, is located in Schön's swamp:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. (Schön, 1987, p. 3)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sellman's aim is to reclaim the term *competence* from those who have 'commandeered' it to describe skills-based learning. For Sellman, competence involves some form of emergent self-awareness or self-revelation. He argues that an expanded understanding of competence, one that includes phronesis, is necessary if practice is to be more than the mere routine application of technically derived protocols or algorithmic responses to the complex issues facing practitioners in

everyday work environments. According to this view, competence both encompasses those practitioners who transcend purely technical approaches to solving or resolving messy practice situations and begins to operate in ways that cannot be adequately described in technical rational terms.

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

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

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

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

Interestingly, Stephen Kemmis suggests that calls for phronesis might be seen as a response to a lack in the present thinking and discourse about professional practice; that is, a reaction to a disquiet about the realities in which professionals go about their work. He describes this lack as a 'negative space' and suggests that

phronesis might be seen as a placeholder for the 'something more' that we are looking for in our thinking about the practice of professionals.

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

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

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

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

Of further note, Kemmis draws attention not only to *individual* phronesis, that of the practitioner, but to *collective* phronesis, the collective good that a professional community commits itself to through its practice as a profession. This notion of collective phronesis, and the implications it opens up for how professions envision

and enact what they do, raises a new area worthy of discussion amongst the epistemic communities of the professions at large.

# CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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