

# PHRONESIS AS APPOSITE WISDOM

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**Abstraksi:** Phronesis atau hikmat terapan adalah sebuah kualitas khusus dalam Kekristenan, namun tidak eksklusif bagi tradisi dan pemahaman Kristen. Phronesis diartikulasikan dengan gaya tertentu, misalnya pengambilan keputusan situasional atau interaksi adat dalam keberadaan manusia. Dalam artikel ini, perspektif filosofis dihasilkan dari interaksi antara phronesis dan kehidupan – kemauan, tanggung jawab, kebebasan, dan akal sehat. Eksplorasi perspektif ini akan digunakan untuk mengartikulasikan sifat phronesis dan ekspresinya dalam tujuan, panggilan dan identitas manusia. Pemahaman phronesis di sini mengartikulasikan tantangan epistemologis dan hermeneutika yang dapat memperkenalkan ekspresi Kekristenan secara spesifik yang mana memberikan kontribusi kepada perkembangan manusia melalui kemurahan hati dan kebenaran.

**Abstract:** *Phronesis or applied wisdom is a specifically Christian quality, yet is not exclusive to Christian tradition and engagement. Phronesis is articulated with specific stylistics, such as situational decision-making or customary interaction within human existence. In this article, philosophical perspectives are generated from an interface of phronesis and life—volition, responsibility, freedom and common sense. Exploration of these perspectives will be used to articulate the character of phronesis and its expression within human purpose, vocation and identity. Engagement with phronesis here articulates epistemological and hermeneutical challenges that can preface specifically Christian expression that contributes to human flourishing through generosity and veracity.*

**Keywords:** epistemology, interpretation, wisdom

## INTRODUCTION

Aristotle proposed three forms of knowledge: science or the *why* of anything; *technē* or the *how* of practical application; *phronesis* or *applied wisdom* that is apposite for acting contextually within unique times and places—akin to situational ethical decisions. Phronesis is not learnt like science or *technē*; it is acquired in life within challenges of living integrally. Phronesis is not simply knowledge; it is intelligence that knows how to respond wisely and practically within unique situations.<sup>1</sup> Phronesis emerges in recognising our range within existence and our relative relation to all

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans, David Ross, rev. intro. and notes, Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 2009), § VI.5.

passing things.<sup>2</sup> *Phronesis* is *apposite wisdom* that is synthesised from multiple disciplines, drawing on ancient and contemporary, philosophical and ethical sources.<sup>3</sup>

## QUALITATIVE METHOD

Phronesis is a synthesis of philosophical, ethical, social and practical understanding exhibited by competence and plausibility within human life and relationality. Phronesis is forged dialectically within life, time, experience and attentive thought. However far back we reach in terms of sources, influences or precursors—whether in language or culture—there is always something else prefacing anything. We can never get to the absolute source and therefore the unvarnished truth of anything. Our access to unequivocal truth is a seeming impasse; therefore, we must locate ourselves within infinite coordinates. We are suspended between unsearchable greatness and inscrutable minuteness, so we must *learn our range*, for *we are something but not everything*.<sup>4</sup> What does learning our range mean in practice? Is idealism a refusal to accept the range or limits of our materiality within time and region? Is pessimism a failure to suspend limits within sublime aspects of life? Do we aim too high or too low? What is *range* in relation to *missing the mark*? Too far or too short is missing the mark, as being wide of the mark is also missing it.

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<sup>2</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi, ed. with intro. and notes, Anthony Levi (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 1999), § 230.

<sup>3</sup> The following works suggest a range of contiguous challenges, skills and application necessary to apposite wisdom or phronesis. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., foreword, Danielle Allen and intro. Margaret Canovan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 2018); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004). David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 3rd ed. trans. and ed. with intro. and notes, Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1993); Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James C. Meredith, rev. ed. and intro. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Pascal, *Pensées*; Daniel C. Russell, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, § 230.

Phronesis is negotiating *our range*, dialectically, with and between selected sources that invariably, as selected, are interpreted and weighed qualitatively. Therefore, phronesis is conscious of limited understanding, which invokes humility in ascertaining our situation within the scope of life. We are neither nothing nor everything, but as Pascal suggests, knowing this locates us uniquely within existence—for unlike other things that exist, we are aware of what we cannot encompass in our existence and this makes us remarkable.<sup>5</sup> Phronesis is exhibited qualitatively, by gratitude and humility of recognition that neither rages against limits nor asserts arbitrary determinations from an immediate sequence of existence, even if existence imposes much that is seemingly arbitrary onto human life. With our certainties concerning existence so easily questioned by time and contingency, wisdom exhibits reticence in our assertions. Phronesis is therefore ascertained qualitatively in discerning a composite tonality relating to range and appropriate or common sense judgments concerning life. What phronesis looks like, how it functions and its consequent effects and benefits are evidenced by epistemological engagement relating to means and ends concerning life.

### **PHRONESIS AS EPISTEMOLOGY**

Is life a serious pursuit with an end purpose or can any purpose in life finally, only be focused on immediate activities? Are these two possibilities compatible? Can they be coordinated? If an end can be pursued as a fictive drama, a game, with hypothetical consequences, so maximising present happiness and fulfilment, life then, is a process in which the present means and not the goal are most important.

While pursuing a purpose underpinned by a requisite epistemology concerning the goal of life would seem to be more logical, applied engagement with the present game in which one role is relative to another appears to be a default engagement that

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<sup>5</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, §§ 146, 155.

determines an epistemological focus of another kind. If life is a game with stakes that are high or low with degrees of chance in play, what matters then, is how the game is played, for this is what we carry with us, rather than any hypothetical loss or gain in its ultimate outcomes. Playing the game of life with skill, concentration, discipline, composure and fairness is what matters. Happiness is contingent on playing the game well, not on specific outcomes, whether detrimental or favourable. Not to attend to the immediate game seriously and passionately is reprehensible and a source of fear and anxiety as to its progress.<sup>6</sup>

There is a certain prudence in this advice, yet wisdom is concerned with ends as a means of monitoring cybernetically, our present orientation. The end need not be prescriptive as specified in detail; it may be aspirational in content, with flexibility in how this is translated. Purpose orientated toward an end is not passé, even if many of our contemporaries hold a degree of contempt for such orientating *fictions*—at best, after *as if* simulations by which to play the present game of life. Practical wisdom or phronesis posits and questions philosophically concerning purpose; this is practical inasmuch as what we think and how we orientate individual and social existence has tangible effects and consequences beyond playing a game within hypothetical parameters, albeit enthusiastically, pragmatically, that is only meaningful while in play.

Purpose is not abstract but is nestled within temporal and spatial dimensions of existential engagement. Duration of time is my experience of time, which may feel long or short, depending on the activity. Proximity is my experience of space, which is relative to people and things, near and far.<sup>7</sup> Whether by duration of time or proximity

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<sup>6</sup> With reference to Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: Penguin, 2010), § VII.II.1.

<sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, intro. Hye-kyung Kim (New York: Barnes and Noble INC, 2004), 20.

within space, we are implicated in contextual perspectives. This is not a weakness in human perception of reality; it need not be a problem in human interaction.

Phronesis is an *epistemology in progress* amid relative temporal, regional and perspectival conditions within human existence. This epistemology is more than pragmatism—of utility and what works for now; phronesis is the formation of mediating wisdom that is generated within immediate contingencies, yet with a view to horizon which, while also expanding, can orientate cybernetically, our present perspective and engagement with life. This *epistemology in progress* is existentially textured wisdom that encounters sustained vicissitudes and exhibits human ingenuity in solving with practical solutions, problems emerging within human vulnerability and fallibility. While traditional and customary expressions of human life might retain much that is forged through applied wisdom, the continuing need to engage new situations that manifest perennial dilemmas is a particular characteristic of phronesis.

Phronesis is both received as customary and creatively recast as present competence within sustained purpose that is in continual formation, requisite to an ever-expanding horizon, amid enduring vicissitudes and unique situations within which perennial existential challenges are encountered anew.

## VOCATION AND IDENTITY

If a veritable impetus of philosophy is the imperative to *know yourself* (*gnōthi seauton*)<sup>8</sup>, then phronesis can be characterised as knowing oneself within an existential vocation that recognises dialectical movement amid life's contradictions—a movement of moments that negate existence, as also inspiring subjectivity that is free to transcend such contradictions by growth, formation and new insight. To know oneself is a

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<sup>8</sup> Notably, Plato, *Protagoras*, trans., intro. and notes, C.C.W. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 343b; also, Plato, “Phaedrus”, 229e, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, trans. and intro. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin, 1973).

personal imperative as both subjective and objective within the context of life—subjective becoming objective by intentional investment of self; objective becoming subjective by assimilation and interpretation of extrinsic phenomena. By contrast to life as fragmented, life is engaged within a dialectical movement of formation and phronesis with purpose among others.

To know oneself is a heuristic vocation of self-discovery—of freedom and aspirational creativity in a unity of subjective engagement with existence as inspirited, in continual movement and reception of horizon as also objective. Through relationality, we encounter life subjectively and objectively at one time; we know ourselves by relation as known by others; we know ourselves as objective by recognition among others. Within the context of determinations and so the designation of things, we discover that we are and we are not *this* or *that* thing; inspirited life is constant as a movement of moments in subjectivity becoming objective and objective becoming subjective by reference to life and others.<sup>9</sup> As a heuristic vocation, knowing oneself is a constant movement toward actuality; this actuality is encountered as larger than our present perception of ourselves.

Vocation is inspirited as inducting intelligence into existence as actuality—as new determinations that are exhibited in actual life by intelligent tangible expression. This is also an induction of phronesis or practical wisdom by freedom and discipline in bringing to be what ought to be by intelligent concepts and specific activities. To reiterate, this induction is inspirited as subjectively invested objectivity and objectivity given to subjectivity. Phronesis is not pragmatic but pneumatic as a vocation, to know oneself, and to induct aspirational foci by free volitional and material expression.<sup>10</sup> To

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<sup>9</sup> Georg W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit* 1827-28, trans. and intro. Robert R. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8,10, 13, 26-27.

<sup>10</sup> With reference to Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit*, 59, 60-61.

know oneself, then, is a dynamic process of inducting an actual self into new expressions of continuing formation within life.

Identity is dynamic as a process of continual character formation among others. This has significant implications as to what constitutes identity as something that is not substantiated in itself, determined as stable, as residing behind a veneer of changing expression. While our sense of continuity within life is related to some concept of identity being the same now as it was ten or twenty years ago, identity is also distributed among many reference points and constantly changing sites of vocational engagement and relationality, each with its own capacity to solicit alternative memories in constituting past identity. While *individuality* is frequently cited in assertions of personal freedom and independence, a focus on *my individuality* is an abstraction. We do not possess individuality; individuality does not experience the freedom to think and to act independently. A person thinks and acts freely with varying degrees of independence; any person does so within the context of relation with others, for being a person is also never without degrees of mediation within relationality. Therefore, freedom and independence are expressed in particular activities in relation to others. *Individuality* is an abstraction that is without reference to relation or activity, which also define our freedom.

Identity is variously implicated in variegated relationships, responsibilities and so inexorable materiality. If a person with a trade received the soul (*psyche*) of a corporate magnate, the tradie might think and feel differently, but to everyone else, he or she would still be a tradie. In this hypothetical, Locke suggests that identity is recognised primarily as a body not as a psyche; body is a social dimension, psyche can

be private.<sup>11</sup> Locke proposes an alternative view of human identity to Descartes who suggests that thinking constitutes identity, prioritising mind over materiality.<sup>12</sup> Whatever someone thinks, a body substantiates who a person is among others. Whatever aspirations are felt, tangible interaction with others is primary within identity. Issues of identity and relationality criss-cross the imperative *to know oneself*, thereby invoking wisdom in its most applied dimension—living life daily, tangibly and integrally among others.

### **PHRONESIS WITHIN CHANGE**

Prudence, no matter how plausible and useful, can easily founder on a simple reality—that we do not know what will happen in any tomorrow. We might aim to be prudential, but we cannot be certain of the future, as also an early Christian writer reminds us, *you do not know what will occur tomorrow. For what is your life? It is a vapour that appears for a while and then vanishes* (James 4:13-14). The future is always pending, near, yet in reality unknown. Another's actions, a chance event or a decisive decision can change future options and challenges in an instance of time. The future resists our propensity to establish certainty by calculation or conjecture. People can be unpredictable; contingencies of time and chance can scuttle any predictable ratio of cause and effect.

Tangible particularities of life, even as ambiguous, are important—after *Ecclesiastes' planting and reaping, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, seeking and losing, rearing and sewing, silence and speech* (3:1-8). These are descriptive—of life's various symmetries—quintessentially, birth and death—but not

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<sup>11</sup> Locke portrayed a cobbler and a prince. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged with intro. and notes, Pauline Phemister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), § II.17.15.

<sup>12</sup> The sustained impetus of Descartes' Meditations. René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. and intro. Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin, 1998, 2000), 12-104.



determinative (*kill and heal, love and hate, war and peace*). They are indicative not imperative. In such observations of human activity, *everything has its opportune time*. Time is a medium through which dialectically, we discover the amazing diversity of life and the uniqueness of human experience. *There is a time for everything*—and time takes time, but in it we are; in it we exist (3:1). We only have *now*. *Now* does not coincide with any other *now* and is indifferent to any time we designate as *now*. In becoming *now*, time also terminates every *now*. Without a *now*, there is no past or future; every *now* necessarily ceases, becoming a past in receiving a future.<sup>13</sup> Within time, we are amid new situations that invoke phronesis—knowing how to apply ourselves within changing contexts and challenges of life. If this situation seems the same as others previously encountered, it is not. No two contexts or decisions are exactly alike. This is the value of phronesis within situational ethical considerations.

Social values are always changing; they are to varying degrees, relative to previous and future values. Concerning values, there is always a tension between relative change and durability. The challenge of phronesis is to induct flexible valuations in response to changing conditions of life, yet with durability within the coherence of human community. This challenge traverses a tension within human existence—the need to adapt and the desire for stability; responding to both endorses human dignity as to freedom and continuity. Phronesis resists absolute valuations, for these presume a clear view of everything—to survey all things; yet equally, phronesis resists relative valuations as impervious to the necessity of enduring values for human dignity beyond contextual and changing idiosyncrasies.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> With reference to Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Plato and the Platonists II*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 170-172.

<sup>14</sup> A dialectical approach to our actions is neither relativist, so right according to context, nor absolute, without regard for context. With reference to Leszek Kolakowski, “The Demise of Historical Man”, *Is God Happy? Selected Essays*, trans. Agnieszka Kolakowski (Stirlingshire: Penguin, 2012), 264-276.

Perspective is an inevitable factor within life—of experience, so duration of time, and relationality, so relative proximity to others. Perspective is creative—as purposefulness within time and relationality within shared spaces. The words *near, far, before, beside, behind, over, under* and many similar, indicate relative relation between things.<sup>15</sup> The relationships are real but relative, though *relative* does not exist without relation. What does *near* mean without two things near each other? We constantly refer to relative relation between things; words denoting a *relative* relationship indicate a relative condition. Negotiating many aspects of life would be impossible without the capacity to articulate relative relation between many things, though contemporary elevation of the concept *relative* is only possible because there are such relationships. Otherwise, reference to *relative* without requisite relation is meaningless.

We weigh situations and make decisions within contextual perspective and valuations. Interpretations are therefore inevitable in discerning choices. The capacity to recognise perspective, so as to see something from another angle, represents an ability to see hypothetically and to think dialectically, otherwise than as we ordinarily think. *Insight* is a willingness to inhabit another perspective. This is an issue of will, imagination and generosity. This is phronesis.

Within freedom of choice, imagination is in play—a decision can be made toward a projected outcome that is presumably advantageous or happier. Any significant decision involves risk, which might be detrimental; the effects of a decision can surpass its imagined outcome. Therefore lore and law envelope volitional freedom with social limits that range from tacit censure to legal prohibitions; these can allay precipitous decisions and irrevocably detrimental trauma. Imagination might project beneficial outcomes beyond such limits through certain actions—only to be surprised,

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<sup>15</sup> Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, 67-68, 70-72.

invariably by the social response or regretfully, unanticipated effects. This scene is perennial within human life. So too, is the necessity of phronesis to address it.

### **RHYTHM AS PHRONESIS**

We do things habitually because this is efficient.<sup>16</sup> This is true for a time. A habit is a material means of doing something effectively with regularity. Alternative means develop, perhaps obscurely from an accidental change of rhythm and eventually, habitual means can be shown not to be so efficient. An activity can be genuinely efficient and remain a valuable habit. How, then, is a habit recognised as inefficient and a previously unrecognised burden? Exposure to a similar and seemingly familiar activity within another context or culture can generate surprise discovery and comparison, making an implicit habit explicit for reassessment.

Tacit awareness is knowing what we do not consciously know until it changes. Here, new insight can often emerge. Creative connections are made between things explicitly known and things not known to be known. Tacit awareness within the rhythm of familiar activities is, paradoxically, significant in generating such creativity.<sup>17</sup> While events, novelties, surprises and crises punctuate or rupture routine, these are also contingent on a context of eating, sleeping, arising, travelling, regular commitments and responsibilities within work, family and community. Life is lived within daily routines. Routine can be experienced as deadly repetition. Rhythm is repetition, yet sprung with joy that is not present in routine. Paradoxically, while routine is often equated with boredom, joyous experiences are enhanced and propelled by rhythm. Rhythm is familiar; it is effortless, even when much energy is expressed; rhythm is not

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Peirce, "Synechism, Fallibilism, and Evolution", *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 2011), 358.

<sup>17</sup> Peirce, "Perceptual Judgments", *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 304-305.

merely repetition, which could be tiresome and mind-numbing.<sup>18</sup> Instead, rhythm gives implicit expression to renewal; rhythm exhibits energy and a sense of ease, even if engaged with intensity. The familiarity of rhythm is also experienced as *common sense*—it is what we do and enjoy doing because it has a common and natural fit with life.

Common sense is generally cited when an activity or procedure that is not consciously recognised as common sense is questioned, therefore invoking an appeal to *common sense*. Common sense is assumed because it has been sustained over time and among others in rhythms of familiar activity. Common sense is implicit and unnoticed because it is common, habitual and seamless within shared activities. We only recognise common sense when what is commonly assumed and accepted becomes for some, dysfunctional or morally problematic. It is therefore obvious as *common sense*. Yet contested, common sense is both recognised and ceases to be common. Phronesis negotiates this differential.<sup>19</sup>

Rhythm is character, for what we are is what we characteristically do beyond any singular action. Disciplined activities are rhythmic; beyond habit, these rhythms abbreviate significant values as sustained enjoyment in repetition that also holds in reserve, an ease for creative spontaneity.<sup>20</sup> Rhythm implies a decision to repeat a specific activity as a joyous response to an imperative accepted as good, true and sensible. To engage, even if the engagement is familiar, is seemingly second nature yet every time, a specific decision and a commitment.<sup>21</sup> Rhythm is confidence in the

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<sup>18</sup> A habitual activity can become a natural pleasure that seems effortless. Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. Robin Waterfield, ed. Harvey Yunis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), § 1369b32.

<sup>19</sup> Common sense judgments are an expression of phronesis by which other perspectives add to composite understanding. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 40; Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. and intro. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 168.

<sup>20</sup> With reference to Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), 67-68.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) §§ 147, 151.

rightness of an activity, an imperative to which we are paradoxically captive by consent; its joy is confirmed merely in its reiteration, by responding again to the same imperative. It is not futile or worthless; otherwise it would be tiresome and eventually abandoned. Yet is any rhythm true because it is compelling and pleasurable? Phronesis weighs the value of activities inscribed in rhythms of tacit common sense.

## CONCLUSION

What then, is specifically Christian about wisdom and how does this contribute to human flourishing? *Phronesis* is articulated with specific stylistics, such as situational decision-making or customary interaction within human existence. The interface of phronesis and life—volition, responsibility, freedom and common sense is a specific Christian terrain that has been and continues to be traversed within expression of Christian faith, the quintessential expression of which is *faith working through love*. This challenge invokes a specifically Christian phronesis of christological generosity and veracity expressed contextually within life. *Phronesis* or *applied wisdom* is not exclusive to Christian tradition and engagement, yet it is a specifically Christian quality exhibited through its christological expression of *grace and truth* in the midst of human life. Engagement with phronesis here articulates epistemological and hermeneutical textures that preface its specifically Christian expression in weighing challenges of life as they occur, while orientated to a horizon that is continually enlarged, formed and reformed, even as cybernetically, focus is becoming more accurate in its fidelity to purpose—which for Christians, is defined and expressed christologically.

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