InFocus | Rationality and Judgment Revisited

By Jon A. Schmidt, P.E., SECB

I have written previously about the shift in modern philosophy and culture away from practical judgment (*phronesis*) in favor of technical rationality (*techne*), primarily citing the work of Joseph Dunne ("Knowledge, Rationality, and Judgment," July 2012; "The Rationality of Practice," September 2012). Recently, I have encountered several other authors who have observed the same trend and called attention to its detrimental impacts on society.

Scott H. Moore, a philosophy professor at Baylor University, specifically references Dunne in a 2011 online paper, "The Rough Ground and the Consolations of *Techne*" (**www.georgetowncollege.edu/cdal/files/2011/06/scott_moore.pdf**). His goal is "to highlight the differences between *phronesis* and *techne* and emphasize the necessity of pursuing the difficult prudence of *phronesis* while resisting the all-inclusive allure of *techne*." To that end, Moore provides several delightfully concrete examples:

- "It is not merely the existence of these wonderful gadgets … it is the delusory fantasy which many of us entertain that, through technology, we will finally be able to overcome the challenges which we face."
- "Take for instance the ways in which the easy access to information can corrupt us. When I can always look it up, I have no reason to learn it."
- "The analysis or critique of work principally becomes the analysis of whether proper procedure was followed."
- "… one cannot repair one's marriage in the same way that one repairs one's computer. There is no single set of rules or skills or formulae which may be used to solve the problems which vex human community."

David Edward Tabachnick, a political science professor at Nipissing University in North Bay, Ontario, Canada, expresses similar concerns in his 2013 book, *The Great Reversal: How We Let Technology Take Control of the Planet*. His primary objective is "to provide a history of the changing relationship between the judgmental and technical through an analysis of some of the great texts of political philosophy."

Tabachnick begins with the ancient Greeks, contrasting Plato's concept of "kingly *techne*" with Aristotle's call for "*phronetic* rule." Augustine subsequently divided practical judgment into "prudence of the flesh," dealing with earthly matters, and "prudence of the spirit," addressing religious life. Thomas Aquinas later added a divinely informed conscience as a "top-down" guide to doing right, in contrast to the "bottom-up" nature of *phronesis*. Machiavelli then effectively took both "the good" and God out of the equation, recasting politics as a *techne* for strong rulers to employ in shaping their realms.

Hobbes completed the transformation, exalting science over fallible human "guesses" and issuing a challenge to find the set of natural laws that presumably govern people's behavior. The (so-called) Enlightenment that followed sought to "purge any and all irrational elements from everyday life," leading Kant to divorce judgment from experience and attempt to ground it instead in universal principles. Meanwhile, the emerging field of statistics provided governments with a new way to measure and predict social and economic developments. As a result, "instead of good judgment guiding technical knowledge, technical knowledge comes to guide judgment, turning the ancient virtue of *phronesis* into a subordinate of a larger scientific project to perfect humanity."

Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel, *Brave New World*, may be interpreted as a vision of what the future could look like if this process is taken to its logical (albeit extreme) conclusion. He posits an era when people are mass-produced like any other product and genetically engineered to be perfectly suited for a predetermined role in the new order. Rather than a totalitarian regime maintained by fear and punishment, as in George Orwell's *1984*, Huxley imagines a scenario in which those in power instead simply guarantee everyone's permanent happiness by turning traditional morality on its head and freely distributing a safe tranquilizing drug. Needless to say, Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* – genuine well-being or human flourishing – is nowhere to be found.

Tabachnick's last two chapters survey various responses to the "Great Reversal," in particular that of Heidegger, and discuss the prospects for a "*phronesis* revival." For this to happen, "technical innovation must be directed by the higher virtues such as those associated with family, community, education, politics, and philosophy"; and "technical production has to be preceded by the ethical mastery or self-discipline of the passions." The chief obstacle is the fact that "[w]e have handed over our decision-making procedures to a range of technical experts, specialists, and managers and have thus left few if any sources for relearning the practice of the virtue."

Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe make much the same point in their 2010 book, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*. They apply recent insights from psychology and cognitive science to validate the core concepts of Aristotelian virtue ethics, drawing real-life examples primarily from doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Constant pressure to focus on health care costs (rather than quality), client advocacy (rather than justice), and standardized test scores (rather than education) have had an adverse effect on these professions. Rules and incentives have become ubiquitous, reducing or even eliminating opportunities for the exercise of discretion, which is essential to the development of good judgment as well as personal satisfaction.

What about engineers? Our codes and standards have become too lengthy and prescriptive. Computerization and globalization threaten to turn our services into a commodity. Managers in many firms urge us to maximize our billable time and attempt to develop policies and procedures that will streamline our "production" efforts. While the work that we do is obviously very technical in nature, it still needs to be governed ultimately by practical judgment if we are to be Virtuous Engineers who strive to enhance the material well-being of all (**www.VirtuousEngineers.org**).▪

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