

# Phronesis

## AQ1

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## Synonyms

### AQ3

[Prudence, deliberation, wisdom in practice, praxis, wisdom in action.](#) “Prudence” and “deliberation” are often considered as synonyms for phronesis. While the Aristotelian concept of “sophia” means wisdom, the term implies theoretical wisdom which is not necessarily wisdom in practice. “Praxis” is closer in meaning to phronesis and refers to thoughtful doing and reflective practice, while phronesis refers to wisdom expressed in the domain of practice. Phronesis and praxis emphasize wisdom in action, not just wisdom in theory. The western Greek concept of phronesis has been equated with the eastern Buddhist concept of mindfulness (McEvelley 2002). [Prudence, deliberation, wisdom in practice, praxis, wisdom in action.](#)

## Definitions and Description

Phronesis is etymologically derived from the Greek φρόνησις, which means wisdom that has been acquired from learning and experience of practical matters. Socrates is said to have equated phronesis with virtue in his dialogues (see Plato’s *Meno*, circa 429–347 BC). Phronesis is known as an Aristotelian concept meaning “practical wisdom,” which is concerned with how to act wisely in particular situations. Aristotle considered phronesis to be an ethical virtue closely connected to the ultimate end of human well-being that is described as “eudaimonia” from both individual and societal perspectives. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (circa 240 BC), phronesis is distinguished from other terms for wisdom and intellectual virtues such as episteme and techne which translate as knowledge and art, respectively.

Phronesis introduces values into judgment and the decision-making process. The distinguishing quality of phronesis is the requirement to arrive at reasoned decision about action with regard to whether the outcome is thought to be advantageous (Martin 2015). Through “phronesis,” an “insider-researcher” can “make good practical judgements about their research practice” (Gibbs et al. 2007, p. 367). Phronesis is vital in relation to all matters that affect humanity including sustainability-related matters. [While the Aristotelian concept of “sophia” means wisdom, the term implies theoretical wisdom which is not necessarily wisdom in practice. “Praxis” is closer in meaning to phronesis and refers to thoughtful doing and reflective practice, while phronesis refers to wisdom expressed in the domain of practice. Phronesis and praxis emphasize wisdom in action, not just wisdom in theory. The western Greek concept of phronesis has been equated with the eastern Buddhist concept of mindfulness \(McEvelley 2002\).](#)

## Phronesis and Ecological Wisdom

Two millennia after Aristotle, a jazz band formed in 2005 by Danish bass player Jasper Høiby took the name of “Phronesis.” The album cover to their 2018 release *We Are All* is a reference to the environmentalist John Muir. Muir was noted for being an ecological thinker and known as “John of the Mountains” and “Father of the National Parks,” being an early advocate for the preservation of wilderness in the USA.

Oliver and Dennison (2013) believe that the two terms *phronesis* and *praxis* describe what needs to happen in environmental science and that these two terms are at the core of developing a practical philosophy for environmental science: it is not adequate to have a knowledge of what needs to be done or recommend what should be done; action is also required, and this “doing” in terms of environmental science can take the form of protection or restoration activities. As a Professor of Marine Science and Vice President for Science Applications at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science (UMCES) in the USA, Dennison recognizes the importance of action in relation to environmental science and sustainability issues.

Competent project managers are required to take forward sustainability and environmental matters effectively, and *phronesis* and *praxis* are considered as key components of mapping standards and competence assessment approaches. The mediating role of *praxis* and *phronêsis* between theory and practice is advocated by Bredillet et al. (2015) to resolve the tension between performance and attribute-based approaches to competence assessment.

The construct of *ecophronesis* (ecological *phronesis*) is posited by Xiang (2016) as the ecological practical wisdom that one might acquire in relation to the use of ecological practice; *econ phronesis* acknowledges the capabilities of ecological practice demonstrated by human beings or the *ecophronimos*, who, over thousands of years of human coevolution with nature, developed the master skill of ecological practical wisdom that enabled them to make, and act well upon, the right choices in challenging circumstances of ecological practice. Such ecological practical wisdom manifests itself in a myriad of ecological projects serving human beings’ enlightened self-interest and continues to evolve, as Xiang (2016) puts it, in a contemporary society of unprecedented socio-ecological transformations.

## Summary/Conclusion

The concept of *phronesis* highlights the importance of practical wisdom and thoughtful action in relation to all matters including those relating to sustainability and the environment. It is not adequate to know what needs to be done and even advocate what needs to be done. It is crucial that something is done and what is done is informed by practical wisdom. *Phronesis* is both an ethical virtue and an intellectual virtue (Eikeland 2008, p. 53) that must be acquired through practice rather than through the learning of theoretical knowledge. *Phronesis* enables its possessor to figure out “the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time” (Schwartz and Sharpe 2010, pp. 5–6).

Sustainability issues involve practical matters such as protecting the planet from environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources; preventing/reducing air, water, and soil pollution; and preserving the long-term health of ecosystems. Practical matters require practical reasoning. “Practical reasoning is deliberative, it takes into account local circumstances, it weighs tradeoffs, it is riddled with uncertainties, it depends upon judgment, profits from wisdom, addresses particulars, it deals with contingencies, is iterative and shifts aims in process when necessary. Practical reasoning is the stuff of practical life. It is not the stuff of theoretical science. Its aim is to arrive at good but imperfect decisions with respect to particular circumstances” (Eisner 2002, p. 375). To sum up, what is needed is *phronesis*. As Dieppe (2011) has argued, it takes wisdom and experience, in addition to scientific data, to make the right decisions.

## Cross-References

Ecology and Ecosystem

Enlightened Self Interest

Environmental Management System

Ethical Theories

Mindfulness

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