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The Phronetic Approach to Politics: *Values and Limits*

According to Bent Flyvbjerg, a *phronetic* approach to understanding provides pathways to restructuring current practices in the social sciences. That is, it emphasizes that which can be known beyond the epistemological or methodological, and incorporates observation of values, judgments, interests, and power-dynamics in order to more completely *understand* and *explain* a particular political scenario at hand for study. This requires inquiry that goes beyond reducible facts into general principles; instead, it seeks to incorporate and consolidate all variable information in a given context in order to empower the researcher to both add to the existing political discourse, and to effectuate political change through localized problem-solving. Indeed, the approach is detail-oriented, case-specific, and seemingly all-encompassing to a given scenario. That is, it takes into account *everything* possible. By this, the phronetic researcher *ought* to be *better*-informed of the practical—that which is readily available in order to solve localized political problems and to direct political participants to think in terms of value-rational understanding and action. Phronetic knowledge *ought* to be of utility to the citizenry—and not *only* to academia. It does not only explain phenomena, but also provides for altering the outcomes associated with political phenomena by integrating value judgments and broader ethical precepts into the analysis. This is instrumental in producing knowledge that provides for practical application of problem solving that can be deemed *good* or *better*, and provides a means for ascertaining the *bad* or *worse* in a given political scenario. This paper examines *how* knowledge is produced by the phronetic approach, *what* knowledge can be known

by the phronetic approach, and *whether* there are inherent limitations to the phronetic approach to understanding.

### How Knowledge on Politics is produced under the Phronetic Approach

Under the phronetic<sup>a</sup> approach to understanding politics, knowledge is produced through the analysis of *values*, and utilizing said values in making: “judgments and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social actor.”<sup>1</sup> Particular *values* can be observed by employing what Flyvbjerg terms the, “classic value-rational questions: [1] [w]here are we going? [2] Is it desirable? [And,] [3] What should be done?”<sup>2</sup> By applying value-rational questions to the political ‘scenario’ at hand, the phronetic researcher considers values and interests in relation to *choices*, and makes *value*-judgments based on said relation.<sup>3</sup> Under this approach, knowledge on politics is produced by *focusing* on values *with* reference to “praxis,” based on “practical value rationality.”<sup>4</sup> That is, the phronetic researcher “deliberat[es] about . . . values and interests” within a particular practice; in the political context, praxis comprises of the political practices and customs within the given scenario under analysis.<sup>5</sup> This requires adding an additional dimension to the analysis of: “individuals, organizations, and society” by attributing the capacity, “to think and act in value-rational terms”—as opposed to analysis solely based on “instrumental rationality.”<sup>6</sup> This requires the consideration of variables that are context-dependent, and are thus not typically “encapsulated by universal rules” that can be applied to a specific political scenario under analysis.<sup>7</sup> As Flyvbjerg states, “[p]hronesis requires an interaction between the general and the concrete; it requires consideration, judgment, and choice . . . [and] *experience*.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, at the core of the phronetic approach is making *value*-judgments, which requires looking beyond that

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<sup>a</sup> The genealogy of Flyvbjerg’s conception of ‘phronesis’ begins with Aristotelian intellectual virtues, then to Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals, and then to Foucault’s observations on power.

which is can be known epistemologically or methodologically—that which typically *ought* not include value-judgments.<sup>9</sup>

Where applying the phronetic approach to gaining knowledge on contemporary politics, Flyvbjerg proposes a revised and expanded version of the classic value-rational questions as a starting point of analysis: “[1] [w]ho gains, and who loses? [2] Through what kinds of power relations? [3] What possibilities are available to change existing power relations? [4] Is it desirable to do so? [*And,*] [5] What are the power relations among those who ask the questions?”<sup>10</sup> That is, by deliberating on values and interests, the researcher inevitably must think in terms of *ethical* choices. By framing the value-rational questions *this* way, the phronetic researcher: “. . . avoid[s] the voluntarism and idealism typical of so much ethical thinking.”<sup>11</sup> That is, the phronetic researcher focuses on the prominence of *particular* values and interests in regards to particular political practices, and thereby comes to understand political custom in a more *practical*, usable way.<sup>12</sup> This can require conducting research in the particular locale of the political practices under analysis—in addition to extensive documentary research.<sup>13</sup> As Flyvbjerg puts it, “phronetic research . . . tak[es] its point of departure in local micropractices, searching for the Great within the Small and vice versa;”<sup>14</sup> for, the phronetic researcher is: “highly aware of the importance of perspective, and see[s] no neutral ground, no “view from nowhere,” for [one’s] work.”<sup>15</sup> That is, the phronetic approach requires a view that takes into account the myriad values and interests in the political context, and thus, requires *detail*-specific research and consideration of *multiple* points-of-view.<sup>16</sup> Further, the phronetic approach requires a sufficient understanding of *power* in relation to political *progress*, and thus, takes into account that which may hinder normative political outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

Given such a detail-oriented, non-universal, case-specific form of inquiry, the phronetic researcher avoids issues of foundationalism versus relativism in the ethical sense by thinking in terms of “contextualism or situational ethics.”<sup>18</sup> By incorporating both the social and historical *context* in which the object of study *occurs*—instead of searching for universally applicable principles to apply to political scenarios—the phronetic researcher avoids “relativism and nihilism” from creeping into one’s research.<sup>19</sup> Further, the phronetic approach is not opposed to interpretive analysis; that is, data that is the result of first-person interpretation is not therefore worthless data.<sup>20</sup> In other words, information is not devalued if it consists of interpretation; the phronetic approach utilizes *multiple* interpretations in forming judgments on values and interests in the political context. Key to finding the political praxis in which specific values and interests relate, the phronetic approach also incorporates narrative or interview into political analysis.<sup>21</sup> By this, the different perspectives affected by power-dynamics associated with political praxis are better understood, or “clarified.”<sup>22</sup> The phronetic approach does not attempt at establishing clearly observable, reproducible findings that may be tested under experiment in the sense found in the natural sciences; nor does it attempt to explain political phenomena in a quasi-natural-sciences type of way. Instead, it aims to explain that which is not suitable or explainable under the natural sciences model of inquiry, thereby providing an analytical framework for explaining that which the natural sciences do not.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the results of testable, observable, and reproducible political phenomena are too few to adequately shed light on values and interests in relation to the political praxis of a given socio-historically contextualized scenario; the inquiry simply requires *more* in order to *understand*.

The phronetic approach to understanding politics focuses on the *practical*: “practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situations.”<sup>24</sup> This includes observation

of “actual *daily* practices [*emphasis mine*]”—in which the given political scenario under analysis is comprised.<sup>25</sup> Further, just as data is in no way devalued due to having an ‘interpretive’ quality, differing practices are not ‘valued’ in relation to *other* practices;<sup>26</sup> that is, the approach requires taking into account the totality of practices of which the relevant political praxis is comprised.<sup>27</sup> To this end, incorporation of “case studies, precedents, and exemplars,” where applicable, can enhance the quality of the phronetic research of the political praxis under analysis.<sup>28</sup> Under the phronetic approach, all data is “context-dependent”—thus, at the core of the approach—is the ability to extrapolate political ‘knowledge’ from data in both the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ sense.<sup>29</sup> As Flyvbjerg puts it, “[p]hronetic research focuses on the dynamic question, “How?” *in addition* to the more structural “Why?” [*emphasis mine*],”<sup>30</sup> by seeking to both distinguish and resolve questions on a ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ level—whether involving an individual, institution, or society—the phronetic approach provides a framework for answering questions that arise *both* at the individual and structural levels and how the two relate to each other.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the phronetic approach is an analytical approach—as opposed to “theoretical or methodological”—whereby social and historical context is applied to the object of study at hand in order to discover and understand the political praxis at play in the given context.<sup>32</sup> By this, the phronetic researcher is able to: “. . . clarify and deliberate about the problems and risks we face [in the given political context] and to outline how things may be done differently, in full knowledge that we cannot find the ultimate answers to these questions or even a single version of what the questions are.”<sup>33</sup>

#### The Kind of Political Knowledge achieved through Phronesis

According to Flyvbjerg, the phronetic approach *may* assist with developing contemporary political and social sciences into a: “reflexive analysis of values and interests aimed at praxis.”<sup>34</sup> Phronetic knowledge clarifies and contributes: “. . . clarif[ies] the problems,

risks, and possibilities we face as humans and societies;” and, it: “contribut[es] to social and political praxis.”<sup>35</sup> That is, in the political context, knowledge from the phronetic approach of analysis *ought* to provide sufficient knowledge in order to act—to engage in political practice and to effectuate meaningful dialogue on the state of ethics within political practice. For, “[p]hronesis is . . . a tacit skill for doing the ethically practical;”<sup>36</sup> thus, political knowledge achieved by *phronesis* imbues one with the capacity to address normative claims within a given praxis—in a practical, knowable, relatable, and malleable manner. Further, phronetic knowledge makes one attuned to the ethical limits of science and technology, given the approach’s focus on human *values*.<sup>37</sup> Phronetic political knowledge *sees* the “concrete, the practical, and the ethical”—which is typically, “neglected by modern science;”<sup>38</sup> for, phronetic knowledge is: “deriv[ed] from interpretations of the status of values and interests . . . aimed at praxis.”<sup>39</sup> In essence, phronetic knowledge is the result of “problem driven” analyses; phronetic knowledge therefore provides solutions to *specific* ethical problems within a given political context.<sup>40</sup> Phronetic knowledge reveals power-dynamics in relations and the link between said relations to political custom.<sup>41</sup> Further, phronetic knowledge *ought* to place one in *the* contemporary political dialogue, with insights into problem-solutions, potentialities of change, and the inherent risks involved within any particular course of action aimed at praxis.<sup>42</sup>

The kind of political knowledge acquired by *phronesis* is that which may be “confirmed, revised, or rejected according to the most rigorous standards.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, phronetic knowledge is not unlike peer-reviewed, thoroughly scrutinized, academic inquiry typical to the sciences. That is, “only to the extent that the validity claims of phronetic political scientists are accepted will the results of their research be accepted in the [political-analysis] dialogue.”<sup>44</sup> It is knowledge resulting from a “pragmatically governed interpretation” of the values, interests, and

practices in the given political context under study.<sup>45</sup> It is knowledge that provides: “concrete examples and detailed narratives of the ways in which power and values work in politics;” understanding of the consequences resulting from the particular status of power and values in relation to the political praxis in a given scenario; and, the ability to offer ways in which said power and values can be altered in order to effectuate *different*—hopefully *better*—outcomes.<sup>46</sup> Further, phronetic political knowledge provides clarification on the different roles at play in a given political context. That is, it reveals: “who is doing what to whom” in a given political context, thus providing insight into the social and power dynamics within relations.<sup>47</sup> To be clear, knowledge on politics achieved through *phronesis* is *not* that which provides: “ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge about the nature of [political] phenomena;”<sup>48</sup> rather, it provides understanding of political phenomena in context, taking into account motives, values, judgments, and interests involved, and synthesizes said knowledge into an ability to offer informed solutions to particular political problems, *and*, relate said solutions to more general, universal, structural—indeed *macro*—political knowledge. The validity of said knowledge is made evident where it: “contribut[es] to society’s capacity for value-rational deliberation and action.”<sup>49</sup> It *ought* to enhance understanding of political phenomena, and provide society with pathways to making more *informed* political choices.

#### The Limits of Phronesis and the Potential to Overcome

In essence, Flyvbjerg’s *Phronesis* is an ‘enhanced’ and ‘quasi-fortified’ version of the case-study approach to knowledge. Thus, inherent limitations to the case-study model are equally found in *Phronesis*, despite Flyvbjerg’s claims that said limitations can be avoided by ‘replacement’ (relativism by contextualism, foundationalism by situational ethics, etc.). It is true that by employing different ways of understanding, relating, and measuring to a particular



phenomenon, one's involvement suggests significant amount of knowledge on the phenomenon at hand; however, the knowledge remains specific to the phenomenon, and provides no insight that is generalizable *enough* to impart knowledge that is *useful* outside of the context of the phenomenon. Further, it is true that virtually all political knowledge is context-dependent to *some* degree; however, having to take into account virtually every detail in a given political context—to include the knowledge of individual motives, values, judgments, and interests—establishes a context so specific to the 'event' of observation that applicability to the 'similar' becomes increasingly rare. A portfolio of case-studies may therefore appear to represent several detail-specific scenarios that *involve* politics, but say nothing about politics in *general*. This speaks to the core of the question: 'what *is* knowledge?' Does one *know* politics because they have studied a particularized political scenario in every which way possible? Is it of no consequence that that which is known about the particular political scenario cannot be applied to *other* political scenarios? Is context-dependent knowledge of any value in either understanding or participating *in* politics? It seems apparent that *some* phenomena will be reducible to generalizable principles and others not. Thus, is the highly involved, 'boots-on-the-ground,' ethically-charged phronetic approach necessary to understand politics in a *useful* way?

Perhaps *phronesis* is most helpful when considered a form of *observation* in which *all* data is found. By this, a sort of *transcript* is available to the researcher in establishing a starting point for further political inquiry—indeed, there may be enough there to provide starting points into philosophical, scientific, or technological inquiries as well. *Phronesis* is indeed thorough, and appears not to adhere to a specific methodological approach to a case-study. Instead, it allows for incorporating *any* and *all* approaches to inquiring on a particular political context at hand—which can be characterized as the 'case under study.' The core question here is

whether doing so is *necessary* in acquiring political knowledge. Certainly, *more* knowledge of a socio-political scenario is of value to the researcher who endeavors to grasp every aspect of the subject at hand. However, said value remains with the researcher if the imparted information is not decipherable beyond the particular scenario under study. Therefore, the knowledge is of personal value to the researcher, but of no value to the greater discourse on the *subject* of politics unless the political scenario at hand is so common as to provide an inherent confirmation of what is *already* known in political discourse. With such intense observation under *phronesis*, the case's 'commonness' becomes vague given the existence of *so much* variable information. Thus, the question remains: is *so much* information *necessary* in order to understand political phenomena? According to Flyvbjerg, the totality of said information provides for knowledge that empowers one to effectuate *change*: one *ought* to be able to *utilize* said information in formulating solutions to *real* problems specific to the scenario at hand. It is not clear whether this is true, especially where 'unfettered' access to information is not available to the researcher. Nevertheless, this implies that where the researcher has no interest in *changing*, but simply *understanding*, then the phronetic approach is simply not *necessary*. It therefore depends on the 'context' of the researcher rather than the 'context' of the phenomena under study.

Thus, the potential to overcome inherent flaws of the phronetic approach is not readily available within the phronetic framework. For the researcher, the phronetic approach to case-study may provide substantial insight to a variable-rich scenario in a given context. However, for the amount of work involved, it appears little can be extrapolated from observation of a particular political scenario that can be applied elsewhere. That is not to say that *nothing* can be extrapolated; but, for the amount of work involved, including a dimension whereby the researcher is tasked with effectuating change to contemporary discourse, the ability to gain

knowledge that is not so specific to the scenario is indeed very difficult to achieve. However, Flyvbjerg does state that the approach is *problem-driven*. Thus, where there is a specific problem that is in need of solving in the immediate sense, *phronesis* does appear to be a viable approach. It is under the problem-driven model does *phronesis* appear to apply in the sense that it is an investigatory approach that takes into account values, motives, judgments, interests—which presupposes that said is central to the *problem* at hand. Given that the problem to be solved is specific to the scenario under study, there is no issue of needing to utilize that found in the investigatory process in a more general sense elsewhere. If anything, it is here where the approach becomes methodological, as the researcher will inevitably employ the all-encompassing approach when tasked with other problems specific to *other* scenarios. Where there is a political ‘problem’ at hand—typically including some power-dynamic—the researcher *ought* to seek understanding of all variables that affect potentiation of change in a given context. However, it does not stand that the investigatory process is therefore applicable to achieving or adding to political knowledge in *general*. If anything, *phronesis* imbues the researcher with *experience*, which will certainly assist in academic endeavors outside of the context at hand. However, this *experience* ought to inform the researcher as to the limitations of the approach, and thus, the phronetic approach too requires context. It is best applicable under certain conditions—a *methodology* (Flyvbjerg would certainly disagree here)—but does not seem sufficient for achieving *more* generally applicable political knowledge, or even the changing of how social sciences are practiced in *general*.

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<sup>1</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, “A Perestroikan Strawman Answers Back: David Laitin and Phronetic Political Science,” *Politics Society* 32(2004): 399, accessed on November 12, 2012, doi: 10.1177/0032329204267290.

<sup>2</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 130.

<sup>3</sup> Flyvbjerg, “A Perestroikan Strawman,” 402.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>6</sup> Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 130.  
<sup>7</sup> Flyvbjerg, “A Perestroikan Strawman,” 402.  
<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 403  
<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 399  
<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 405  
<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 406  
<sup>13</sup> Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 132-133.  
<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 133-134  
<sup>15</sup> Flyvbjerg, “A Perestroikan Strawman,” 406.  
<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 406-407  
<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 407  
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 408  
<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 411  
<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 412  
<sup>24</sup> Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 134.  
<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 135  
<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 136  
<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 137-139  
<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 140.  
<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>34</sup> Flyvbjerg, “A Perestroikan Strawman,” 399.  
<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 400  
<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 401  
<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 402  
<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 404  
<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 406  
<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 407  
<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 407-408  
<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 409  
<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 410  
<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 411  
<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at Pg. 409  
<sup>49</sup> Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 167.