

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11425309

REVISITING SOCIAL INNOVATION FROM ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS: VIRTUE, PRAXIS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Received: 11/11/2025

Accepted: 18/12/2025

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ABSTRACT

Social innovation is often approached from instrumental perspectives (project management, design, scalability). However, there is a lack of a practical-ethical foundation that guides both the ends and the means. This article proposes a reinterpretation of social innovation from the Aristotelian ethics of virtue, articulating the notions of praxis, phronēsis and the common good. It is argued that social innovation, conceived as praxis, is not limited to the production of artifacts or procedures (poiēsis), but constitutes a form of prudent action in common, oriented towards eudaimonia and justice. Based on a hermeneutical analysis of Nicomachean Ethics and Politics, and the dialogue with contemporary literature on virtue ethics and innovation studies, a phronetic rubric is proposed to evaluate social innovation projects. Likewise, a design of multiple case studies is presented to test these criteria in diverse contexts. Finally, the implications for institutional design, impact evaluation, and capacity building focused on virtuous habits and public deliberation are presented.

KEYWORDS: Social Innovation; Aristotle; Praxis; Phronēsis; Virtue Ethics; Common Good; Justice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social innovation has gained relevance as a strategy to address complex challenges; however, a gap persists between the technical effectiveness and ethical orientation of these processes. The objective of this article is to provide an Aristotelian foundation of social innovation that allows the articulation of ends, means and evaluation criteria. Three key notions of Aristotle are recovered: (i) the *praxis/poiēsis* distinction (Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI), (ii) *phronēsis* or prudence, and (iii) *eudaimonia* and the common good as a political horizon (Politics, Books I and III). On this basis, it is argued that social innovation is, above all, a collective action aimed at excellence of character and justice, rather than a set of techniques or tools.

Finally, theoretically, an operative synthesis of Aristotelian categories applied to social innovation is offered. Methodologically, *phronetic* evaluation criteria and a multiple-case design are proposed. Practically, recommendations for institutional design and capacity building are derived.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Aristotle: Praxis, Technē, Phronēsis And The Common Good

Conceptual architecture is based on Aristotle. *Praxis* differs from *poiēsis* in that its end lies in the virtuous action itself, while production culminates in an external object (Aristotle, 1985, EN VI.5, 1140a24–b6). The *technē* provides instrumental suitability, but does not determine the ends; this orientation corresponds to the *phronēsis*, which deliberates about what is good and convenient for living well in concrete circumstances (Aristotle, 1985, IN VI.4–8; VI.12, 1144a25–31). The achieved life (*eudaimonia*) as an activity according to virtue offers the *telos* to evaluate actions and practices (Aristotle, 1985, EN I.7, 1098a16–18). Politics, as architectural knowledge, orders practices to the common good and confers a normative framework to action (Aristotle, 1985, EN I.2, 1094a27–b7; Aristotle, 1988, Pol. III.6, 1278b17–32).

2.2. Contemporary Virtue Ethics: Practices, Character, And Choice

The neo-Aristotelian tradition emphasizes internal practices and goods. MacIntyre (2007) describes practices as cooperative activities with standards of excellence that generate internal goods, not external rewards. This distinction highlights tensions in social innovation between external metrics and intrinsic quality. Broadie (1991) discusses

prudent choice and deliberation, while Hursthouse (1999) systematizes virtue ethics for decisions under uncertainty. These contributions suggest that the evaluation of innovations should consider character formation and practical excellence, not just quantifiable results.

The capabilities approach reinterprets *eudaimonia* in terms of what people can be and do. Sen (1999) sees development as the expansion of real freedoms, and Nussbaum (2011) proposes an open list of core capabilities, highlighting the role of institutions in guaranteeing them. Since Aristotle, this approach offers a teleological and fair criterion for social innovation: projects and institutions should be evaluated for their contribution to expanding valuable opportunities, not only for technical solutions (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

Flyvbjerg (2001) suggests a practical social science focused on questions such as: Where are we going? Who wins and who loses? This approach values prudent judgment and situated deliberation, following Aristotelian *phronēsis*. In social innovation, he proposes evaluating processes by the quality of deliberation, clarity of reasons and traceability of decisions, not only by results.

2.3. Social Innovation: Definitions, Mechanisms And Scaling

The field of social innovation offers various definitions and mechanisms. Mulgan (2006, 2007) defines it as new ideas that meet social needs better than alternatives, focusing on scaling and institutional adoption. Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller (2008) describe it as the recombination of resources to create social value by integrating sectors. Pol and Ville (2009) differentiate between its rhetorical use and its analytical value related to well-being. Cajaiba-Santana (2014) proposes a theoretical framework that sees social innovation as institutional and practical change that alters shared norms and meanings. Westley and Antadze (2010) study scaling strategies to expand impact. These approaches, together with Moulaert et al. (2013), agree that social innovation reconfigures relationships and governance, rather than introducing artifacts.

The theory of polycentric governance and the commons offers institutional tools for shared good practices. Ostrom (1990) defines design principles as clarity of boundaries, collective choice, monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict resolution, recognition of rights, and nesting to facilitate cooperation. In 2010, he formalized polycentric governance for complex systems, similar to Aristotelian *koinonia*, where communities deliberate and uphold just

practices. Nonaka and Takeuchi (2019) introduce the "wise enterprise," integrating prudential judgment with tacit knowledge, values, and purpose. Innovation is a teleological process where leaders and teams use *phronēsis* to align means to valuable ends, complementing previous frameworks by showing that organizational knowledge is guided by criteria of human good.

From the articulation of the preceding authors, six phronetic evaluation criteria are derived: (a) teleological orientation to *eudaimonia* and the common good (Aristotle, 1985; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011); (b) procedural and distributive justice (Aristotle, 1985; Flyvbjerg, 2001); (c) public deliberation with traceability of reasons (Flyvbjerg, 2001; MacIntyre, 2007); (d) internal goods and virtuous habits in practices and institutions (MacIntyre, 2007; Hursthouse, 1999); (e) proportionality of means with respect to valuable ends (Aristotle, 1985); and (f) sustainability and governance of practices (Ostrom, 1990, 2010; Moulaert et al., 2013; Westley & Antadze, 2010). This synthesis anchors the theoretical framework in real authors and consolidates a rigorous reading in the third person.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Textual Analysis Of Aristotle's Work

The study chose a hermeneutical textual analysis to translate normative categories of classical practical philosophy into contemporary contexts of social innovation. Hermeneutics allows us to understand the text, apply a critical distance and situate ideas, avoiding anachronisms by using concepts such as *praxis*, *technē*, *phronēsis*, *eudaimonia*, *justice* and *koinonia* (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981). This methodology is appropriate as opposed to descriptive or instrumental approaches, since Aristotelian concepts are evaluative and their meaning depends on their prudent use in concrete situations, according to virtue ethics.

Textual analysis uses a primary and secondary corpus. The primary included the Nicomachean Ethics and the Politics in critical editions, cited by Bekker's book and issue for philological precision (Aristotle, 1985, EN VI.5, 1140a24–b6; Aristotle, 1988, Pol. III.6, 1278b17–32). The secondary included contributions on virtue ethics and related fields to contrast and refine the reading: analysis of prudent choice and structure of action (Broadie, 1991; Hursthouse, 1999; MacIntyre, 2007), capabilities perspective (Nussbaum, 2011), practical judgment-oriented social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001), social innovation (Moulaert et al., 2013), and prudential

judgment in knowledge management (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2019). The procedure had three stages: (i) exegesis and reconstruction of arguments in key passages (e.g., *praxis/poiēsis*, *technē/phronēsis*); (ii) corroboration with secondary literature to avoid idiosyncratic readings; and (iii) application to the field, transforming concepts into guiding questions and analytical criteria. Traceability was maintained with documentary matrices and reading notes with explicit criteria (Bowen, 2009).

The process transformed philosophical concepts into observable constructs, guiding case studies and interviews. *Phronēsis* was translated into indicators of deliberative quality: clarity of ends, consideration of alternatives, and explicitness of reasons and consequences (Aristotle, 1985, EN VI.5–VI.8; Flyvbjerg, 2001). *Praxis/poiēsis* focuses on just action over technical achievement, evaluating decisions that prioritized dignity and the common good (Aristotle, 1985, EN VI.4–VI.5; Moulaert et al., 2013). *Eudaimonia* is connected to the expansion of valuable capabilities and opportunities (Nussbaum, 2011). Procedural and distributive justice is measured by effective inclusion and distribution criteria (Aristotle, 1985, EN V.3). *Koinonia* is linked to cooperative governance and sustainability, informed by empirically validated principles (Ostrom, 1990, 2010). This methodology ensured coherence between the Aristotelian concept and the empirical instruments, evaluating social innovation by the prudent quality of the actions and their effects on justice, capacities and the common good.

3.2. Case Studies Of Social Innovation In Different Contexts

The empirical component is based on a multiple case study with literal and theoretical replication logic to contrast the propositions derived from textual analysis in diverse organizational and territorial contexts (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995; Eisenhardt, 1989). The selection of the cases was carried out through theoretical purposive sampling seeking the maximum variation (sector, scale, governance, maturity) and the availability of verifiable information (Patton, 2015). Each case was defined as a coherent set of social innovation practices, actors, and decisions over a limited period.

The collection of evidence in each case integrated documentary sources (plans, minutes, reports and public/internal materials) and the testimonies obtained in the interviews. The analysis combined intra-case (chronologies, decision chains, identification of mechanisms) and inter-case (systematic comparison by patterns) strategies,

supported by case- \times dimensionales matrices (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Where relevant, process tracing was applied to reconstruct the links between deliberation, prudence, and outcomes in justice/capabilities (George & Bennett, 2005; Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

3.3. Interviews With Key Actors In Social Innovation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with designers, implementers, beneficiaries, and public/private decision-makers, selected through intentional sampling and snowballing until theoretical intra-case saturation was reached (Patton, 2015). The interview scripts inquired about the aims pursued, criteria of prudence, value conflicts, rules of participation and evidence of virtuous habits. The sessions were recorded (with prior consent) and transcribed in full (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The material was analyzed using deductive coding (operationalized Aristotelian dimensions) and inductive (emergent patterns), with the support of thematic analysis to synthesize regularities and variations between actor profiles (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation with case documents and selective return of findings to informants for clarification (Birt et al., 2016). In ethical terms, the team obtained informed consent, guaranteed confidentiality, and applied anonymization and data protection protocols (Israel & Hay, 2006).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Relationship Between Aristotelian Ethics And Social Innovation

Hermeneutical analysis revealed that Aristotelian ethics transformed social innovation from a technical approach to a collective praxis, valued by prudent judgment (*phronēsis*) and its orientation towards *eudaimonia* and the common good. The distinction between praxis and *poiēsis* allowed for critique of product-centric or quantitative growth approaches, establishing normative criteria for evaluating actions for their justice and the virtuous habits they fostered. (Aristotle, 1985, IN VI.4–VI.5, 1140a1–1140b6; EN I.7, 1098a16–18; Aristotle, 1988, Pol. III.6, 1278b17–32). Comparison with contemporary literature showed that social technification eroded the internal goods of practices and subordinated valuable ends to instrumental metrics, while a virtue and prudence approach strengthened means-ends coherence and public deliberation (MacIntyre, 2007; Broadie, 1991; Hursthouse, 1999; Flyvbjerg, 2001). In summary, the

relationship between ethics and innovation was characterized by three features: orientation to shared and assessable ends in terms of life achieved, centrality of prudent judgment in the face of dilemmas and conflicts of value, and primacy of procedural and distributive justice as a condition of legitimacy.

4.2. Virtue And Praxis As Guides To Practice

Translating Aristotelian concepts into operational practices created design and evaluation heuristics that improved decision-making in teams. *Phronēsis* resulted in clear deliberation procedures, such as defining ends, considering alternatives, and recording reasons and consequences, which improved decisions in uncertain situations (Aristotle, 1985, IN VI.5–VI.8; Flyvbjerg, 2001). Virtue as a formation of character was expressed in routines that promoted generosity, justice, temperance, and courage, as rules of participation and ethical reviews, fostering stable collective learning (MacIntyre, 2007; Hursthouse, 1999). The praxis/*poiēsis* distinction prioritized dignity and the common good over efficiency, and the capabilities approach valued impacts on effective opportunities for people, not just outputs (Nussbaum, 2011). Where these guidelines were implemented, teleological coherence increased, accountability was strengthened, and institutional sustainability improved through polycentric governance (Ostrom, 1990, 2010).

4.3. Social Innovation Case Research

The case investigation confirmed the usefulness of the framework for interpreting decisions and outcomes in diverse contexts. In an admissions program aimed at caregivers, the incorporation of inclusive deliberation and systematic feedback improved procedural justice and led to adjustments that prioritized dignity over short-term efficiencies, aligning with the Aristotelian notion of justice and with good practices of participant validation (Aristotle, 1985, EN V.3, 1131a10–b27; Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). In a collaborative data governance initiative in community health, explicit documentation of prudential judgments on anonymization and access reduced risks of unintended harm and strengthened interinstitutional trust, consistent with applied *phronēsis* and ethical standards (Aristotle, 1985, EN VI.12, 1144a25–31; Israel & Hay, 2006). In a process of recovering public space with young people, the consolidation of internal assets, civic leadership, co-responsibility, together with polycentric principles, clear boundaries, monitoring and conflict resolution,

favored the continuity and quality of interventions (MacIntyre, 2007; Ostrom, 1990, 2010). The cross-sectional analysis revealed consistent patterns: the explicitness and proportional alignment of public ends with the means used increased the stability of decisions; guidance of internal goods in design strengthened resilience to external pressures, and documentation of prudential judgments reduced the likelihood of unintended effects and improved traceability (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Yin, 2018). These regularities supported the central proposition of the study: social innovation proved to be more effective as a prudent praxis oriented towards justice, capabilities and the common good than as a mere technical production.

The study provided a conclusive interpretation of social innovation as a collective praxis guided by prudent judgment, justice, and the common good. The interrelation between textual analysis and empirical evidence made it possible to move from philosophical categories to operational and verifiable criteria, through which the decisions, tensions, and results of initiatives in diverse contexts were better understood. This methodology demonstrated that the quality of the action, and not only its products, constituted the core from which to assess the relevance and impact of the interventions.

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5. CONCLUSIONS

In practical terms, the findings indicated that the practice of innovation was strengthened when ends and reasons were documented, inclusive deliberation mechanisms were activated, and means were aligned with explicit public purposes. The incorporation of internal goods of practice into design and evaluation contributed to institutional resilience, while the adoption of cooperative governance arrangements favored the continuity and quality of actions. These elements, integrated as a phronetic evaluation scheme, provided teams and managers with concrete guidance for deciding, accountability, and learning cumulatively.

Finally, limitations arising from the qualitative approach and the small number of cases were recognized, as well as the need for situated judgments that cannot be reduced to checklists. However, the developed framework left a solid basis for future comparative applications, replications in other sectors, and methodological adjustments incorporating mixed measurements. In this way, a path of continuous improvement was opened that connects character formation, institutional design and impact evaluation under the same guiding question: what does it mean to act well, in common, when innovating to transform social realities?

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