

Keynote address

Mentoring and the Virtues in the Age of AI

The Hon Justice Melissa Perryⁱ

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. I recognise their continuing connection to the land, waters, and culture. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging. I welcome First Nations peoples attending this evening.

I also wish to extend my deepest thanks to the hosts of this event, McGrathNicol, and to those participating in this inspiring and valuable mentoring programme. The contribution of the late Emmanuel Alfieris who, among his many achievements, was a mentor and a founder of this initiative, should also be acknowledged.

It is an honour to be here.

I grew up in a home filled with shelves and shelves of books. From the great classics of English literature to the *Famous Five* and the *Secret Seven*, to the mystical magical world depicted by CS Lewis in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. I had a voracious appetite for reading – so much so, that I suspect that my childhood was seriously sleep deprived, as I curled up under the covers late into the night reading books by torchlight.

These books didn't just take me into a different world. Some were instrumental in forming my view of the world and my values. Chief among these were my mother's extensive collection of works on archaeology and the ancient world, and my treasured, dog-eared collection of Greek myths. For I was very proud, and was brought up to be very proud, of my Greek heritage. Indeed, as a little girl so proud was I of the achievements of the birthplace of democracy that I can see myself reflected in the character Gus Portokalos in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, who found a Greek derivation to every word – “Give me a word”, he said, “any word, and I show you that the root of that word is Greek”. Even the word “kimono” did not stump him for long!

This brings me to the origins of a word of relevance to this evening. The word “mentor” can be traced back some 3500 years to Homer's *Odyssey*. When King Odysseus embarked upon his epic journey to the Trojan War and beyond, he entrusted the care of his son Telemachus to his friend, Mentor. Ironically we can say now, Mentor was not so aptly named for he neglected his duties, whereupon Athena, the Goddess of justice, wisdom and war, took it upon herself to give guidance to Telemachus by impersonating Mentor, and encouraged him to find the courage and the wit to set sail to find his father. It was only in 1699 that a French writer continued the story of Telemachus in *The Adventures of Telemachus*, and elevated Mentor's role to that of a trusted and wise adviser in line with its meaning today.ⁱⁱ

The exponential speed at which AI and machine technologies are changing the ways in which we live and work, and the uncertainty about job prospects and the disruption consequential on these developments, should cause us to reflect more deeply on what we mean by mentoring and how best do we discharge the role of a true mentor.

Applications based on large language models like Grok, ChatGPT or CoPilot can give the semblance of advice on how best to achieve your career goals and write your CV, your covering letter and your professional online

profile. A companion bot can ostensibly sympathise with you when you miss out on a job or a promotion, and can provide you with encouraging words albeit at the risk of undue flattery. But these words are no more than the result of the empty algorithms and machine processes of an inorganic thing with no sentience, no conscience, and no responsibility for its outputs. As humans, our needs are far more profound.

My thoughts are that the role of a mentor is broadly speaking, that of a friend in a professional context who has your best interests at heart. As Aristotle said, a friend is another self - someone you care about for their own sake.ⁱⁱⁱ The mentor's role is therefore fundamentally not about advising a person on how best to achieve their career goals or socially approved goals or to ascend the career ladder, although a mentor may of course give gentle guidance about such things. Fundamentally it is about advising on how to lead a good life worthy of a human being and pursuing those things about which they feel passionate and committed and in respect of which they can find a true sense of achievement.

But from where do we find the values that enable us to pursue such a life?

For myself, I was influenced from a young age by ancient Greek philosophers whose wisdom I believe still speaks to us in the modern world. The good life is *eudaimonia* (poorly translated as happiness, or better as human flourishing). According to Aristotle and others, the way to achieve *eudaimonia* is by the cultivation of characteristic human excellences or virtues – concepts embodied in the notion of Arete (ἀρετή).

Arete meant to me that we should strive to fulfil our highest personal capacities – physically, intellectually through reason and the acquisition of knowledge, and ethically through the pursuit of fundamental human values such as courage, integrity, compassion, respect, responsibility, and justice. A flourishing life is one involving excellence in exercising such human capacities in our thoughts, our feelings and our actions.

Arete was a concept not limited to humans but applied to represent excellence in other living beings such as a horse or a dog, and to inanimate objects the product of human ingenuity. A topical example of excellence in machine technologies from classical Greece is the automatic servant of Philon (also known as Philo), a scientist and engineer from Byzantium. This was the world's first functional robot which was designed over 2000 years ago and, through a complex mechanism, served alcohol mixed with water.^{iv} Indeed, I had the pleasure of seeing a replica of the robot in operation last year at the Museum of Ancient Technology in Athens.



The humanoid robot of Philon.

Applying the concept of arete to the **new** machine technologies of great potential power, I would suggest that excellence should not be simply measured in terms of increases in efficiency, productivity and profitability. Excellence requires us to consider how such technologies can be employed so as to assist each of us in flourishing and realising our fullest potential. This is a fundamentally humanistic approach which conceives of technology as a tool, and not as a replacement for human endeavours, nor a reason for impoverished education and training of young people.

It also means recognising that while AI is about producing outcomes, that is not all that matters to us as human beings. The process leading to an outcome is equally, if not more, important, particularly where the rights and interests of the individual are concerned.

If I can give an example from my own experience in the law. Can judges and decision-makers be replaced by AI? AI may give the same answer as a human decision-maker, and it may give it more efficiently and more quickly. It may also give the answer drawing upon a vast body of knowledge – well beyond the capacity of a single human being to digest. But the fact that the reasons given for the outcome are the product of a human being who listened and considered the evidence and the submissions, and brought to bear human qualities such as compassion, fairness and mercy upon their decision, matters to those whose lives are affected by the decisions which we as judicial officers make and take responsibility for.

To give a further example, for those of you who are mentees, would it mean the same to you if you were to confide your disappointment in unfairly missing out on a promotion to a chatbot? Would you feel listened to and supported? And for those of you who are mentors, would you have responded with empathy and guidance based on your *lived* experiences which an inanimate machine, drawing upon patterns derived from large data sets, is incapable of replicating?

To conclude, thinking about mentoring leads us to reflect on what makes a life worth living. This is especially urgent today with the rise of new technologies that could potentially replace human activity, creativity and endeavours across a broad spectrum of professional and personal life. While this involves potentially great benefits, there are also grave risks. To navigate a course through these challenges, we need an ethical compass attuned to human needs, qualities and virtues. In my brief comments today, I have suggested that this compass can be set by reflecting deeply on our Greek philosophical heritage.

It is my pleasure and honour to launch the 2026 Greek Australian Mentoring Program here in NSW.



ⁱ Justice of the Federal Court of Australia; LLB (Hons, Adel), LLM, PhD (Cantab), FAAL. I wish to express my thanks to Dr John Tasioulas and my associates, Henry Chen and Jess Campbell, for their helpful comments in preparing these short introductory thoughts.

ⁱⁱ Andy Roberts, *Homer's Mentor: Duties Fulfilled or Misconstrued* (1999) <https://www.nickols.us/homers_mentor.pdf> (abridged from Andy Roberts and Anastasia Chernopiskaya, 'A historical account to consider the origins and associations of the term *mentor*' (1999) 64 *History of Education Society Bulletin* 81 <https://bulletin-researcher.hes-exelibris.org.uk/PDFViewer/web/viewer.html?file=%2fFilename.ashx%3ftableName%3dta_publications%26columnName%3dfilename%26recordId%3d65#page=29>).

ⁱⁱⁱ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr WD Ross (Oxford University Press, 1925) book IX (reproduced at: <<https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>>).

^{iv} 'The Automatic Servant of Philon', *Kotsanas Museum* (Web Page) <<https://kotsanas.com/exhibits/top20/automatic-servant-first-robot/>>.