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Finding *Phronimos*: Making a Place for Practical Wisdom in the Classroom

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Therefore we ought to attend to the undemonstrated sayings and opinions of experienced and older people or of people of practical wisdom [*phronesis*] not less than to demonstrations; for because experience has given them their eye, they see aright.—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, 1143b11–14

It is a commonplace that today's students are saturated with media messages and images glorifying youth and demonizing old age. So it is not surprising that students react to the above passage by dismissing Aristotle as wrong or irrelevant. To suggest that they are mistaken, however, would require that we show that Aristotle was right in thinking that a key step toward gaining practical wisdom is to listen to older people, and moreover, that practical wisdom is relevant to a college student's life and to what takes place in that student's classroom. In this paper, I argue that this is the case, and I describe an assignment which arose out of addressing these issues.

Is Practical Wisdom Age-Related?

For the sake of this discussion, I will use the term "practical wisdom" as Aristotle defined it. Aristotle arrived at his definition by "considering the sort of people we describe as practically wise"¹ and concluded that practical wisdom "is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for[humans]."² In order to decide whether Aristotle is right to look amongst the elderly or the *phronimos*, or practically wise person, I will begin by considering a simple objection to the claim: that some elderly people act foolishly, and some young people act wisely.

Some may object that many elderly people are in fact, *not* wise, and that therefore, we should not attend to their undemonstrated remarks and beliefs. In response to this objection, I note that Aristotle did not claim that advanced age was a sufficient condition for practical

wisdom. He does not claim that it is a necessary condition either, but since he suggested that one listen to the unproven opinions of elderly people, not children, we can assume that Aristotle linked practical wisdom to advanced age at least as a correlation. The fact that age is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for wisdom does not refute the correlation hypothesis.

There are those, however, who do not think that wisdom is related to age since, they claim, children can also be wise. In a recent article in *Teaching Philosophy*, Rondhuis and Van Der Leeuw note that there are some wisdom theorists who hold that "wisdom is not age related."³ This assessment of wisdom was offered in the context of teaching children philosophy (and wisdom). But in order to argue that children can have wisdom, these theorists have defined the term very narrowly as "openness to experience, creativity and fluid intelligence with many tentative and creating moves."⁴ While openness to experience and creativity may be positive traits, this definition does not seem to capture the salient features of wisdom. For example, a twenty-something corporate executive might be corrupt by all legal standards, but still qualify as wise under the above description, since he is open to new experiences (opportunities for making illegal profits) and quite creative (in keeping financial records such that the illegal activities remain undiscovered). Furthermore, a child could be open to new experiences (such as playing in the middle of the street) and exhibit creativity (making up new games to play in middle of the street) and thus qualify as being wise under the above definition. Such definitions also fail since we can think of wise people who do not meet these criteria. For example, we can imagine a person who may have the right feelings at "the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way," as is "proper to virtue" (*NE* 1106b22–25), yet may not be exceptionally creative or open to new experiences.

As long as we accept a definition of practical wisdom similar to that of Aristotle's, it is difficult to see how one could deny that wisdom is age-related. In regard to the acquisition of this virtue of practical wisdom, he develops two important factors: experience and repetition. The emphasis on experience is seen when Aristotle wrote that virtue "needs experience and time" (*NE*, BK II, 1103a17). The emphasis on repetition follows from the fact that practical wisdom is a *state*. By a "state" Aristotle means a habituation or disposition, and he concludes, "To sum it up in a single account: a state [of character] results from [the repetition of] similar activities" (*NE*, BK II, 1103b21–22). The fact that practical wisdom requires experience and repetition implies that wisdom is age-related, since experience and repetition of experience take time.

However, to say that *phronesis* is age-related is not to say that those who are young are incapable of exhibiting wisdom-like attributes, or that they are unable to take steps toward becoming practically wise. One becomes practically wise by acting as the *phronimos* would act.⁵ Those who are young can (and should, if they hope to become practically wise) act in ways that a practically wise person would act, but this *phronimos*-like behavior precedes the acquisition of the *phronesis* disposition.

To summarize, old age is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for *phronesis*, but since it takes experience and repetition to develop the disposition of practical wisdom, it usually is found among those who are advanced in years. As John Kekes recently reflected, "One can be old and foolish, but a wise [person] is likely to be old, simply because such growth takes time."⁶

Empirical approaches to the question of age and wisdom have arrived at similar conclusions. Gisela Laboowvie-Vief observed that there has been "a flurry of recent writings attempting to define the nature of wisdom from philosophical or empirical perspectives . . . [and there] is some emerging consensus that wisdom refers to a set of attributes assumed to be correlated with advanced age and not usually covered under the umbrella of 'intelligence.'"⁷

Further empirical evidence was offered by Patrick McKee who noted that it "is widely believed among gerontologists that many aging people experience a strong imperative to look back over their lives in an evaluation of their major choices, relationships, achievements and failures." McKee explains that "[g]erontologists call this 'life review,' and have produced a massive research literature on it, with ample suggestion that it can produce basic insights not achievable by other means."⁸ After discussing the issue at length in his philosophy classes, McKee's students usually came to the conclusion that old age is an important factor in attaining wisdom. He summarized, "The philosophical wisdom of mature guardians may often be stated in the form of late-life reminiscences. So, as students readily recognize, late-life reminiscence is an important topic for epistemology that would be impossible to formulate without reference to old age."⁹

If practical wisdom is indeed age-related, that still leaves the second issue: how practical wisdom is relevant to what goes on in the philosophy classroom. This question can be broken into two central questions. The first is the more general question, "Can practical wisdom be taught in the classroom?" The second is the more specific question, "If practical wisdom can be taught, how can it be taught?" I will turn now to the first of these two questions.

Can Practical Wisdom be Taught in the Classroom?

When discussing whether wisdom can be taught in the classroom, an objection students make (often with the rolling of eyes) is to question the very concept of wisdom: "What *is* wisdom, anyway?" Wisdom is difficult to define, and some might infer from this difficulty that wisdom is beyond the scope of the professional philosopher and the philosophy classroom. One way to address this skepticism is to simply ask, "Do you think that Socrates was wise?" or "Do you think that Socrates had more wisdom than your know-it-all neighbor?" Wisdom is something that we do generally recognize and that we attribute to some people in abundance and to others not at all. Thus, even in the absence of an exact definition we should not be forced to conclude that it does not exist. The demand for a "precise" definition of wisdom commits the error Aristotle describes as seeking a precision that is greater than the subject allows. In contrast, the "educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows; for . . . it is just as mistaken to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician as to accept [merely] persuasive arguments from a mathematician."¹⁰

This is not to concede that we have to do without a working definition of wisdom. One may admit that wisdom can be widely recognized in its extremes (i.e. in those who are especially wise or foolish), and that wisdom can be defined in broad terms, but may still object that wisdom's resistance to precise definition makes it a poor candidate for philosophical analysis. It is tempting to point out, in response, the irony of claiming that wisdom is not within the purview of philosophy—since philosophy at least began, as the name suggests, as *philo-sophia*—the "love of *wisdom*." But such a comment invites the sympathy or disdain of many philosophers who see such a notion as a sure mark of the naive or the uninitiated. A colleague recently confessed to me that his aversion to the term "wisdom" came partly from such situations as being cornered at a reunion by a former classmate who said, "Hey, I'm a philosopher, too! I love wisdom, and read all about it!" This self-identified philosopher proceeded to talk about all the self-help books he had been reading, and was surprised to hear that those were not the type of books academic philosophers usually read. It may be true that those untrained in the history of philosophy or those not part of contemporary philosophical discussions often use the term "wisdom" in the context of "self-help," and this admittedly may be irksome at times. But it hardly seems right to abandon the use of the term simply because there are those who misuse it. The fact that books about crystals and tarot cards are often found in the "Metaphysics" section of many large bookstore chains does not prevent academic philosophers from using the term "metaphysics." The

fact that a term such as 'wisdom' gets misused is not reason to abandon the term, but rather to rescue it.

Even if one acknowledges that wisdom exists, and refuses to let the misuse of the term prevent discussion about it, one might still object that practical wisdom is not teachable in a classroom setting. Aristotle himself thought that practical wisdom was not something that could be taught as knowledge is taught.¹¹ Unlike scientific knowledge, he argued, practical wisdom does not deal with necessary truths (such as the Pythagorean Theorem) that can be taught. However, most admit that necessary truths are not the only subjects that can be taught. One can teach the skill of writing, for example, or methods for scientific inquiry. So why not say that practical wisdom is a skill like writing or research which can be taught? Aristotle reasoned that a skill (*techne*) is a state aimed at production (e.g. producing an article or producing a piece of furniture), and that since practical wisdom does not produce anything, it is not a skill. He concluded that "practical wisdom is a virtue and not a skill"¹² and that virtues, unlike necessary truths or skills, cannot be taught.

If practical wisdom is neither a skill nor scientific knowledge that can be taught by the teacher and mastered by the student, then what options remain for introducing practical wisdom into the classroom? If practical wisdom is a virtue, and therefore a habit, I would ask, what is to prohibit teachers from cultivating the habit? As mentioned in the first section of this paper, habits are developed through "the repetition of similar activities" (*NE*, BK II, 1103b21), so it is understandable that habits require time to develop—more time than is available in the brief classroom meetings. Since the development of a habit such as practical wisdom is the task of a lifetime, it is not reasonable to expect a student to accomplish this over the course of a semester. This objection, however, only applies to the *mastery* of the habit of practical wisdom. It does not follow that nothing can be done in a limited period of time to encourage the incremental development of practical wisdom.

Even if one could employ an effective method in the classroom for encouraging such growth, it remains a question how to effectively and reliably measure such growth. Even if one could identify observable traits P, Q, and R, which practically wise people consistently demonstrate, it would not necessarily follow that all people who demonstrate traits P, Q, and R are successfully developing practical wisdom.¹³ Kekes, an advocate of wisdom, wrote that a

fool can learn to say all the things a wise man says, and to say them on the same occasions. The difference between them is that the wise man is prompted to say what he does, because he recognizes the significance of human limitations and possibilities, because he is guided in his actions by their significance,

and because he is able to exercise good judgment in hard cases, while the fool is mouthing cliché.¹⁴

In other words, what appear to be signs of developing wisdom may or may not be true indicators of it. Kekes concludes from this that “wisdom cannot be taught.”¹⁵ However, I would argue that all this shows is that wisdom cannot be accurately measured and graded, not that it cannot be taught.

If formal teaching means providing direct instruction and direct evaluation, the impossibility of effectively and reliably measuring development in the habit of practical wisdom implies that it cannot be formally taught. If one holds the view that only that which can be formally taught deserves a place in the classroom, then it is easy to see why practical wisdom is often “passed over in silence.” However, it does not follow from the inability to measure wisdom that any sort of acknowledgement or encouragement of practical wisdom is unsuited to the classroom. Nevertheless it is common to ignore practical wisdom in the classroom, even if the decision to do so is not derived from explicit deliberation. Wendell Berry sees this indifference to practical wisdom as highly problematic. He observes that even though practical wisdom “is the kind of knowledge...that is fundamental to the possibility of community life and to certain good possibilities in the characters of people. I don’t know where, in the sciences and the humanities as presently constituted, students would be led to suspect, much less to honor, its existence.”¹⁶

The “sciences and humanities as presently constituted” may favor formal teaching, and thus be understandably indifferent or inhospitable to practical wisdom, but practical wisdom can be brought into the classroom without abandoning formal teaching. What better place than the philosophy classroom to acknowledge the existence of practical wisdom and to encourage it? One way to do this is to formally teach that which indirectly fosters practical wisdom. Teachers could then evaluate students not on the achievement of wisdom, but on the performance of wisdom-conducive skills or activities. A second option would be to address practical wisdom informally—that is, in ways that do not carry the expectation or practice of classroom evaluation. In what follows, I will suggest some ways this can be done.

Practical Ways to Foster Practical Wisdom

Having arrived at the conclusion that practical wisdom is age-related and that it is possible and important to encourage its development in the classroom, the remaining question is how to make the relevance of these points evident to the students. The following assignment is one practical way I attempted to do this. The assignment I gave was

quite simple in design; it required that my students find a *phronimos* (someone of advanced age whom they considered to have a high degree of practical wisdom), and engage this person in at least two hours of conversation, preferably over more than one encounter. I provided the students with a list of possible starter questions to get their *phronimos* talking. They were then required to write a summary of the conversation(s) and their assessment of the experience. I chose to make the assignment extra credit, since I knew that not everyone would have access to a *phronimos*.

By suggesting that they try to find a *phronimos*, I hoped to help them see that wise people did not only exist in distant history. The people whom the students chose as wise included grandparents, great uncles, great grandmothers, priests, high school teachers, friends of the family, and a person met at a nursing home. One student described his *phronimos* as an athletic director "at my old high school and a cornerstone of the school as well as the community. He has been a teacher at my old high school for over fifty years. He is a man in his mid to late seventies who has seen a lot in his lifetime." Another student described her *phronimos* as someone who was born in 1905, who "has witnessed two world wars, the Great Depression, and has had personal run-ins with the KKK." Another was a "Jewish man at a . . . Catholic school," and still another was an ex-nun who started a shelter for women and children.

I did not expect that the two hours spent in conversation with a selected *phronimos* would magically transform a student. Rather, my aim was to introduce my students to the idea of getting to know people who are older and wiser in hopes of initiating a habit of turning to a *phronimos* for guidance. Judging by the comments in the student papers, I would not be surprised if this was the outcome for at least some of them. Some of the students said that they found the experience so enjoyable or helpful that they plan to continue meeting with the person (see appendix B).

I did not try to grade students directly for growth in practical wisdom. I graded them on the completion of the project and on the written report and analysis of the experience. Even though practical wisdom was only taught indirectly, such an exercise may encourage students to take steps toward increased practical wisdom.

Since giving this assignment, I have discussed it with other teachers, and have found at least two who have tried similar exercises. One took her students to a retirement home and had each student sit at a table during a meal after which they were to report on their experience. No two students were allowed to sit at the same table, so that they had to talk with people not their age. From these dinner conversations, the students were surprised to find that old people did

not just sit around nursing homes drooling but were in fact interesting and had led fascinating lives. Some of the students began meaningful correspondences with people they met which lasted for the remainder of the elder person's lifetime. I recently came across a similar project where the students were to engage in some sort of service (for example, visiting a nursing home), and then to write up an analysis of the experience drawing from philosophers they had studied. The professor emphasized that he did not grade the students on the degree to which they attained wisdom, but rather on the quality of the analysis of the experience.¹⁷ In these three examples, practical wisdom was taught and evaluated indirectly—students were evaluated not on the acquisition of practical wisdom, but on the completion and analysis of the activity meant to introduce the students to practical wisdom or foster it. Although assignments such as these have their limitations, these kinds of projects do provide a way to acknowledge and foster practical wisdom in the classroom.

In addition to teaching *phronesis* indirectly, it can also be taught informally. By informal teaching I mean teaching that seeks to instruct without subsequent evaluation. Examples of this would include modeling practical wisdom, insofar as this is possible, and speaking about its importance and the role it plays in developing other types of knowledge and wisdom. Informal approaches to teaching practical wisdom need not supplant formal teaching, but can be compatible with it.

The inability to directly teach or formally evaluate practical wisdom are two reasons why it has been largely absent from university classrooms. But perhaps we can offer a response to Berry who does not “know where, in the sciences and the humanities as presently constituted, students would be led to suspect, much less to honor, its existence.” Even if it happens nowhere else in the university, why not make the philosophy classroom a place where practical wisdom is acknowledged, honored, and fostered?

Appendix A: The Assignment

The following is a revised version of the assignment given to my students:

Therefore we ought to attend to the undemonstrated sayings and opinions of experienced and older people or of people of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) not less than to demonstrations; for because experience has given them their eye, they see aright.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, 1143b-11-14

Extra Credit Assignment:

While age and experience are certainly no guarantee of wisdom, it can at least be argued that no one can be wise *without* age and experience (i.e., experience, and thus age, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for wisdom). At the same time that we are growing hungrier and hungrier for information, we seem to have lost our taste for wisdom—and this has led us to undervalue those most likely to be in possession of wisdom. Thus, the challenge I give you is as follows:

1. Find a person over the age of 62 whom you respect and admire—someone whom it might even be apt to describe as “wise.”
2. Spend at least two hours with this person, preferably over two or three separate meetings.
3. During the course of your conversation, try to glean some wisdom from him or her. Try doing this by asking questions of the following type:
 - General questions:*
 - “What do you think is generally *over-valued* by people today?” “What do you think is generally *under-valued* today?”
 - “What in your view is the obstacle that most prevents young adults from finding true happiness?”
 - Other questions (write some additional questions ahead of time that you might ask this person):
 - Specific questions:*
 - “What was one of the most life-changing decisions you have made in your life, and how did you make the decision, and would you make the same decision if you could go back and be faced with the same decision?”
 - “I’m trying to decide what to do in this situation: _____ . What would you do if you were in this situation?”
 - “I’m having a difficult time with _____ . What would you do if you were faced with this?”
 - Other questions (write some additional questions ahead of time that you might ask this person):
4. Write a 400–500-word summary of your conversation along with your assessment of the experience. Was it worth the time spent? Would you find it worthwhile spending time doing something like this in the future?

Head your paper this way:

Name:

Date(s) and time spent with this person:

How you know this person:

*Appendix B: Students' Responses to the Assignment***Excerpts about CONTENT from their conversations**

"I asked him to tell me some experiences that he had that made him a wiser person. Without hesitating, he [began] speaking about World War II . . . 'It is hard to explain, but after the war things were better, my wife seemed even more beautiful, and my job seemed that much better. Experiencing war first hand makes you appreciate the things you have and just how easy it is for you to lose them.'"

"My uncle told me that he wishes that he could go back and tell all of his friends how much they meant to him. He said that I should tell people what's on my mind because I might not ever get a chance to. In all, he wants me to get to know my friends as real people outside of bars and to tell people how I really feel. . . . I always thought that it was important to tell people how I felt, but was often scared to do so. . . . However, hearing him say it to me and knowing that he is older and he does regret showed me I have the opportunity to change now, instead of regretting later."

"I'm trying to decide whether or not to study in San Francisco in the fall. If he were in my shoes he said he would definitely go. He said the experience he had in the Navy traveling was unforgettable and if I could travel and still study then that's the best of both worlds."

"Unfortunately commercialism and consumerism has blinded us to what will truly make us happy. . . . It's a beautiful thing to love without abandon, but it's a scary thing when your heart's broken. If we all love, then no one hurts. But some give all and some give more. It's a dangerous combination. It is hard not to protect yourself.' (He reminds me a little of Kierkegaard!)"

"General principle: Her main concern was how 'everyone needs to rush everywhere, leaving them with no time to actually sit down and enjoy life as it passes by as well as understand what it is exactly that they are rushing about for.'"

"All this movement toward better and easier modern conveniences is pulling people away from the home life personal settings in the home and community and making it more impersonal."

"I asked my grandfather what he thinks is generally overvalued by people today. Without hesitation, he answered "material items." . . . He believes people are too materialistic and measure happiness by their wealth."

"[T]here is too much emphasis on the idea of 'looking perfect.' My grandmother believes that people of today rely on materialistic objects too much and use them in attempts to attain this perfect image."

“When you die, what is important for you to have accomplished? It is a damn shame when one says the acquiring of material goods, i.e., . . . the Beemer, the condos, the jewelry. None of it has taught you a damn thing. Look at all the people you have connected with. The divine events you were awestruck with at the time. Look at your education, both from life and books. What you’ve learned and grown from is priceless. What . . . nurtures our souls is what is important. It has been warped for your generation, kiddo.”

Excerpts about ASSESSMENT of their conversations

“In the past we mostly spoke about baseball or old war stories. . . . This assignment allowed me the opportunity to speak with my grandfather at a much higher level.”

“This conversation allowed us to talk not as grandfather and grandson, but as student and teacher. I am glad I did this and plan on doing it again”

“My grandfather answered the questions as if he wanted to give this information all the time. . . . This was the best experience that I had over break. It had been awhile since my grandfather [and I] sat down and really spoke together. I think it would definitely be worthwhile spending time doing this because it helped bring me back to earth.”

“We spent a little over three hours over three days, which was short because we both know that she had more to say.” I think that this experience [will] be more implanted in our memory because now we really got the chance to sit down and talk with someone we felt was wiser. Not only do they feel good with someone young around, but I also feel good when I have understood all her thoughts of wisdom.”

“This experience was wonderful. Wisdom does come from experience, but does it have to be our experience? What if we can just learn from the experience of those around us? I would be very excited to complete an assignment like this for no reward through extra credit. . . . I enjoy this type of experience. Doing it for class is nice, but everyone should do it just for their own personal benefit.”

“I feel that the time I spent talking to my uncle was definitely worth it. I learned a few things about his life that I did not know. In addition, I was able to take to heart valuable advice. After this experience, I felt a greater need to spend [time] talking to my relatives about their experiences in life and the advice they have to offer.”

“[T]he conversation . . . went much deeper than any words I could ever write on paper.”

“He had a sense of humor about the nature of the assignment, and made jokes as to how ‘they’ have to bribe kids with extra credit in order for them to talk to their older relatives, but the comments were all in good fun.”

Notes

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1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), BK VI, 1140a25–26.
2. *Ibid.*, 1140b4–5.
3. Thecla Van Der Leeuw and Karel Rondhuis, "Performance and Progress in Philosophy: An Attempt at Operationalisation of Criteria," *Teaching Philosophy* 23:1 (March 2000): 33.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Aristotle, *NE*, BK n, 1103b8–11.
6. John Kekes, "Wisdom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20:3 (July 1983): 286.
7. Gisela Laboowvie-Vief, "Wisdom as Integrated Thought: Historical and Developmental Perspectives," in *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 52.
8. Patrick McKee, "Issues of Old Age in Philosophy Courses," *Teaching Philosophy* 22:1 (March 1999): 1–2.
9. *Ibid.*, 3.
10. Aristotle, *NE*, BK I, 1094b24–27.
11. "Practical wisdom cannot be knowledge nor art; not knowledge, because that which can be done is capable of being otherwise, not art because action and making are different kinds of thing." *NE*, BKVI, 1140b2–5.
12. Aristotle, *NE*, BK VI, 1140b30.
13. Making such an inference would, of course, fallaciously affirm the antecedent.
14. Kekes, 286.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Wendell Berry, "An Argument for Diversity," in *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990): 119.
17. John Valentine, "Service Learning as a Vehicle for Teaching Philosophy," *Beyond the Tower: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in Philosophy*, ed. C. David Lisman and Irene Harvey, AAHE–2000). <http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/governance/committees/teaching/valentine.html>.

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