CAN WISDOM BE TAUGHT?

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At the end of a chapter on the new electronic resources in undergraduate education, Ernest Boyer comments that "television, calculators, word processors, and computers cannot make value judgments. They cannot teach students wisdom."[1] But, he continues:

> this is the mission of the undergraduate college, and the classroom should be a place where students are helped to put their own lives in perspective, to sort out the bad from the good, the shoddy from that which is elegant and enduring. For this we need great teachers, not computers.[2]

Though assuming that wisdom is teachable and suggesting the importance of doing so, Boyer's comments leave us with little understanding either of the nature of wisdom or of how it is to be taught. And yet I think we do agree that our efforts, particularly in teaching philosophy, have something to do with students' beginning to acquire wisdom and that this is a vitally important outcome of the educational process. The renewal of interest in the ethics of virtue and in the practical applications of philosophical study point in the direction of philosophy's taking seriously its heritage as the love of wisdom. Is it possible for philosophers to teach students not only what those who loved wisdom thought but also to teach students to be wise? I would like to initiate the discussion of wisdom as a goal of a liberal arts education by arguing that it is possible to teach wisdom; I do this with the hope that some clarification here may help to focus our attention on what is important in our teaching.

I

Socrates, an appropriate starting point for any

discussion of wisdom, insists in the *Meno* that in order to confront the issue of whether or not virtue *(aretê)* can be taught, the concept of virtue itself must be defined. Meno struggles to arrive at an acceptable definition against the sly wit and wry criticism of Socrates. His initial failures lead to a kind of moment of truth from which point Socrates can elicit from him in midwifely fashion the truth, which really has only to be recollected. The conclusion is the rather enigmatic suggestion that virtue is not taught (though we know that Socrates held that virtue *is* knowledge) but given as a "gift from the gods."

I would like to use this Socratic model to structure this discussion of wisdom and its teachability. First, what is wisdom? In a recent book Robert Nozick considers wisdom to be an understanding of what is important, where this informs one's thought and action: "*Wisdom is what you need to understand in order to live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicament(s) human beings find themselves in.*"[3] Brand Blanshard notes that wisdom "involves intellectual grasp or insight, but it is concerned not so much with the ascertainment of fact or the elaboration of theories as with the means and ends of practical life."[4] Clearly, although wisdom is tied to knowledge, it is not simply knowledge; it involves practical judgments based on appropriate evaluations. And that understanding that is involved in wisdom is not, as Nozick notes, a single type but rather diverse.[5] Yet in this diversity there are, I think, three elements that can be identified as essential to an understanding of wisdom: reflectiveness, good judgment, and broad perspective.[6]

Reflectiveness involves considering the events and actions of our lives in relation to their causes and effects. How are our decisions arrived at and what are the consequences of the resulting actions, the implications of the resulting beliefs? Actions must be chosen in part on the basis of these consequences for good or ill, and beliefs must be judged to be warranted or not by their evidence and implications.

Second, *good judgment* results in part from

reflectiveness and manifests itself in appropriate choices in the light of what is most important in life. Wisdom is not simply contemplation, but rather an expression of will in our directing ourselves to those goals and values that inspire our aspirations and determine our character and identity. For Philippa Foot wisdom consists in two parts: knowing the means to certain good ends and knowing how much particular ends are worth.[7] She notes Aristotle's and Aquinas' assertion that cleverness is the ability to *choose* appropriate means to accomplish *any* goal; wisdom is related only to *good* ends for human conduct.[8] Thus, along with Foot, I think wisdom involves judgment about good means *and* good ends.

Reflectiveness and good judgment are made possible in part, and surely enhanced, by a breadth of vision, a *broad perspective* on life. This usually develops out of some "wider experience." It is this element of wisdom that suggests to some that wisdom is the product of a long life of accumulated experiences. But it is not one's age or accumulation of experiences that is essential here; rather, it is the degree of one's engagement with reality, a reality that includes the natural environment and even the framework of theological beliefs that circumscribes one's place in the cosmos. Nozick remarks:

> The person who lives wisely connects to reality more thoroughly than someone who moves through life spoon-fed by circumstances, even if what these try to feed is reality. Whether or not he proportionally pursues the full range of reality, he is aware of that range; he knows and appreciates reality's many dimensions and sees the life he is living in the widest context. Such seeing itself is a mode of connection. . . .
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> Wisdom is not simply knowing how to steer one's way through life, cope with difficulties, etc. It is also knowing the *deepest* story, being able to see and appreciate the deepest significance of whatever occurs . . . .[9]

Spinoza comes to mind here as the one who advocated seeing all things *sub specie aeternitatis*, although as Blanshard mentions, Spinoza's wisdom hovers "a little above the battle."[10]

This scope of vision sets oneself in a community, world, and cosmic context that leads to a certain humility that is characteristic of the wise person. There is an attitude here that distinguishes wisdom from other virtues; in some traditions it is a kind of resignation that is not very productive of moral action and not, I think, very inspiring. But the recognition of our contingency and finitude and the similar limitations of our language and knowledge, though humbling, is the beginning of accepting our place in the world. And, far from producing moral quietism, Thomas Hill argues that seeing oneself as a part of nature, appreciating one's place, produces a proper humility that is supportive of the preservation of natural environments.[11] Although in Hill's view this "self-acceptance" is completely naturalistic—I recognize myself to be merely a part of the natural world—it need not be. I believe one can see oneself in a transcendent dimension that is at the same time not *anti*-naturalistic. Although this view is not required for wisdom or its accompanying humility, it is not antithetical to them either.

II

If wisdom is to be a goal of a liberal educational process, then it must be accessible to more than just the few or the old.[12] And I think it is. As Philippa Foot notes, the knowledge involved in wisdom is "within the reach of any ordinary adult human being." Further, "wisdom, in so far as it consists of knowledge which anyone can gain in the course of an ordinary life, is available to anyone who really wants it."[13] Naturally, though, wisdom is a virtue that is possessed in varying degrees. Stanley Godlovitch argues that advocating wisdom as a moral virtue involves a kind of elitism since in its rarity wisdom cannot be required of "the properly moral man."[14] But, I would contend that wisdom is not an identifiable ideal that one

either has or not. Wisdom can be achieved in different measures. The level of achievement does have something to do with one's ability to acquire knowledge and understanding, but it also involves the scope and depth of one's experience. But can wisdom in whatever degree be focused upon as the goal of an educational process?

Some philosophers, such as Richard Taylor, argue that wisdom cannot be taught:

> [Wisdom] is something that cannot be taught, cannot be conveyed even by fathers to sons, as Socrates repeatedly observed. It can therefore not be taught in a classroom, nor can one be certified in it by any examination or degree.[15]

And yet we think that our philosophy courses particularly *do* encourage reflectiveness, that they *do*, by virtue of the study of critical thinking skills and ethics, enable students to make better judgments about actions and beliefs, and that they *do* promote a broad perspective by getting students to begin thinking beyond the particular and the concrete. However, the teaching of philosophy does not generally make wisdom its explicit goal. Can we set *wisdom* as a goal of philosophical education or, more broadly, of liberal arts education? Is not students' gaining of wisdom a mere by-product of our efforts at teaching other things? Can we in fact direct our efforts at teaching it?

I think so. But to do so we have to think about the educational enterprise as directed towards an overall practical goal, promoting wisdom, rather than either a practical vocational-preparatory goal or a theoretical goal of the acquisition of sufficient knowledge to "prepare one for life *and* career." As Socrates argued in the *Meno*, virtue (and in this case, I would argue, the virtue of wisdom) is not teachable in the sense of disseminating information, not even in the sense of empowering students with lifelong learning skills and aspirations, although this is a valuable goal in itself. Virtue (wisdom) is learned as a "gift of the gods" in that the processes

of teaching elicit the understanding that can enable one to live more fully and wisely. Taylor is correct to say that Socrates did not think wisdom could be taught by conveying information from one to another, even father to son; but, that is not to say that Socrates thought that wisdom could not be *acquired* through the process of teaching. It is just that the teaching involved here is not the same as that indulged in by the Sophists. There are no *specific* guidelines to be promoted, though there are general guidelines that are helpful. In this regard, Nozick mentions Aristotle's golden mean and Socrates' dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living as examples. According to Nozick: "Wisdom about life . . . takes a holistic form. There is no formula to learn and apply."[16]

Nicholas Maxwell distinguishes between a "philosophy of knowledge" and a "philosophy of wisdom" in arguing for the priority of the latter in the quest for understanding. The basic idea of the former, under which he thinks we currently mistakenly operate, "is that inquiry can best help us to realize what is of value in life by devoting itself, in the first instance, to achieving the intellectual aim of improving knowledge, in a way which is dissociated from life and its problems, so that knowledge thus obtained may subsequently be applied to helping us solve our problems of living."[17] Philosophy of wisdom, on the other hand, rejects this as irrational.

> It holds instead that inquiry, in order to be rational, in order to offer us rational help with realizing what is of value, must give absolute intellectual priority to our life and its problems, to the mystery of what is of value, actually and potentially, in existence, and to the problems of how what is of value is to be realized. Far from giving priority to problems of knowledge, inquiry must, quite the contrary, give absolute priority to the intellectual tasks of articulating our problems of living, proposing and criticizing possible solutions, possible and actual human *actions*. The central and basic intellectual task of rational inquiry . . . is to help us . . . [discover and perform] actions which enable us to realize what is of value—happiness, health, sanity, beauty, friendship, love, freedom, justice, prosperity, joy, democracy, creative endeavor, cooperation, and productive work. . . .
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> The central task of inquiry is to devote *reason* to the enhancement of *wisdom*. . . .[18]

According to Maxwell, the shift from a philosophy of knowledge to a philosophy of wisdom would have radical educational implications for all disciplines. Academic inquiry, shaped by the philosophy of wisdom, would be "learning about how to live." Here desires and feelings would form an integral part of the intellectual domain of inquiry. The ends of human life would become the focus for inquiry. Philosophy of wisdom "gives to inquiry the basic task of helping us gradually develop more rational lives, a more cooperatively rational human world."[19]

It may be that Maxwell exaggerates the significance of the practical matter of solving of human problems in the understanding of wisdom. The notion of seeing oneself in some broad, even transcendent, perspective is not emphasized by him. Yet, there is wisdom in what he says! And it suggests ways in which wisdom can be achieved as the outcome of an education that does not portray wisdom as a commodity to be acquired, nor as knowledge to be quantified, but rather as a perspective and capacity to be led into.

A liberal arts education that focuses on developing breadth and depth of study; that promotes disciplinary and cultural critique from the perspective of a wider vision, questioning the segregation of disciplines and encouraging their integration; that, while recognizing that knowledge does have intrinsic value, does not on that basis promote the acquisition of any and all knowledge just because it can be had; that sees the solution of world problems as an appropriate and important focus for academic inquiry; that encourages humility and wonder in the face of a universe that overwhelms our limited

abilities and language; that challenges the notion that all judgments are equally legitimate and valuable and promotes the seeking of value and truth in the engagement with reality; that recognizes and supports the communal/social nature of human living and thriving; that takes as its ultimate task the development of graduates who exhibit significant wisdom and seek more—such a liberal arts education promotes wisdom.[20]

NOTES

[1]Ernest Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Harper & Row, 1987) 173.

[2]Boyer 173.

[3]Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989) 267.

[4]Brand Blandshard, "Wisdom," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 8 vols., ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, Free Press, 1967), 8: 322.

[5]Nozick writes:

> What a wise person needs to know and understand constitutes a varied list: the most important goals and values of life—the ultimate goal, if there is one; what means will reach these goals without too great a cost; what kind of dangers threaten the achieving of these goals; how to recognize and avoid or minimize these dangers; what different types of human beings are like in their actions and motives (as this presents dangers or opportunities); what is not possible or feasible to achieve (or avoid); how to tell what is appropriate when; knowing when certain goals are sufficiently achieved; what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them; how to improve oneself and one's relationships to others or society; knowing what the true and unapparent value of various things is; when to take a long-term view; knowing the variety and obduracy of facts, institutions, and human nature; understanding what one's own real motives are; how to cope and deal with the major tragedies and dilemmas of life, and with the major good things too. There also will be bits of negative wisdom: certain things are *not* important, other things not effective means, etc. (269)

[6]This consideration of the nature of wisdom is greatly influenced by discussions with Philip Gilbertson and reflects his analysis. Brand Blandshard's analysis of wisdom includes reflectiveness and judgment but not broad perspective.

[7]Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978), excerpted in *Vice & Virtue in Everyday Life*, 2nd ed., ed. Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989) 219.

[8]Foot 219.

[9]Nozick 276.

[10]Blanshard 8: 323.

[11]Thomas Hill, "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (Fall 1983): 211-24, in Sommers & Sommers 293-310.

[12]Stanley Godlovitch argues that wisdom is rare because it involves a perspective difficult to achieve and live by. It is unpopular as a virtue because it tends to expose our lives as generally pointless; in contrast to the wise, we are fools.

Wisdom is associated with age because older people are in a better position to appreciate the truth of such verities as that we shall all die and that our limited successes are transient. "On Wisdom," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (March 1981), in Sommers & Sommers 262-83.

[13]Foot 219-20.

[14]Godlovitch 283.

[15]Richard Taylor, "Dare to Be Wise," *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (June 1968): 625-26.

[16]Nozick 178.

[17]Nicholas Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution in the Aims and Methods of Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 65.

[18]Maxwell 65-66. Mary Midgley also argues against the specialization that has fragmented knowledge and for the integration of learning in the interest of understanding and wisdom (*Wisdom, Information, and Wonder: What is Knowledge For?* [New York: Routledge, 1989]).

[19]Maxwell 79.

[20]I think that the whole endeavor to teach wisdom must ultimately depend on some commitment to the objectivity and reality of moral values. The judgments required of the wise must be made in the contemporary context and the context of tradition, but must at the same time remain critical of both. They must also transcend mere self-interest or prudence. Thus, what is required is a perspective beyond the historical limitations of the present situation. But, since this discussion goes beyond the limitations of space here, I leave it until another time.