

# Stating the Problem

## The Loss of Wisdom in the Modern World

In his book *The Decline of Wisdom*, Gabriel Marcel, an early French existentialist philosopher, reflects on his experiences of horror and anxiety while wandering through the ruins of inner Vienna in 1946. What bothered him most was not the physical destruction of so many irreplaceable monuments of an honorable past, “but the state of mind from which that destruction is inseparable”—one from which all feelings of gratitude and veneration for the reality that those monuments themselves stood in honor of had been obliterated. He recounts a similar experience related to him by a friend in a town in Burgundy who was told by an American officer: “You should be grateful to us for bombing all this old stuff. Now you can have a clean new town.” These experiences left Marcel with the sense that our modern attitudes and understandings are peculiarly opposed to wisdom and coeval, in fact, with its decline. The physical destruction wrought upon Europe was, for Marcel, but an expression of a more serious spiritual malaise: namely, our “growing impatience with what tend increasingly to be regarded as obstacles to the advent of a new world, even of a renewed humanity.” The “impatience” of which Marcel speaks here is rooted in a mass-scale civilizational rejection of something both ancient and universal without recognition of which there can be no wisdom.

Marcel’s reflections on these experiences spur him to think deeply about the manner in which our ever-increasing base of knowledge and technological proficiencies has not only outstripped any “wisdom” we might have concerning the relative worth of these gains, but that these advances themselves and the joy we feel in exercising our great powers through them serve to cloud and distort our awareness of the importance of wisdom itself. The reason for this, writes Marcel, is that “a man who has mastered one or more techniques tends in principle to distrust what is alien to these techniques,” and “he will usually be most unwilling to accept the idea that a meta-technical activity may have value.” The “meta-technical activity” that Marcel refers to here is *reflection*, which he calls a “power at one remove.” Marcel contends that the exercise of any sort of power

should by rights always be accompanied by this “power at one remove,” in order that it might serve as a brake or a control against the abuse of power. However, our delight in the magnitude of the capabilities granted to us through modern technology and scientific advancement has made the imposition of such “powers at one remove” extremely unpalatable. Marcel writes, “Technical development does, taken in itself, tend to create a world which is singularly barren and as a result unfavourable to the use of powers at one remove; and let us note that these powers correspond fairly closely to what in other ages was known as wisdom.” Simply put, wisdom has always acted as a counterweight to human pride or *hybris*. Where the counterweight to pride is lacking, “the techniques left, as it were, to their own weight, are . . . burdened by the weight of pride which in no sense belongs to them.” As Marcel points out, the techniques themselves have no intrinsic reality, but are only given a “specious reality” through the vice of abstraction in the one who uses them, takes pleasure in them and lastly “becomes their slave.” Without wisdom to guide us, our sense of our own abilities and powers is distorted and inflated; paradoxically, we become slaves by overestimating our own worth and abilities. In the absence of wisdom—that is, when our awareness and recognition of “the universal” is debased and driven out, the place of wisdom “is taken by a system of technical processes tightly fitted into one another, whose complexity is only rivalled by the poverty of the ends it serves.”

Marcel states the problem of wisdom’s decline in modern times succinctly, and although his book was written many years ago, his description of our modern inability to recognize the significance of what we have lost remains profoundly relevant as an assessment of contemporary views about wisdom. In the remainder of this chapter, I offer to you, my reader, a small yet reasonably representative cross-section of such views. Each of the authors surveyed here concerning the nature of wisdom writes precisely from within this modern orbit; each of them is touched in his or her own way by the problem of living in a society that does not value wisdom and that is dazzled by its own technological prowess. And each of these authors, to various degrees, both sees and *does not* see into the nature of what is wisdom.



Various academics have remarked about the dearth in modern scholarship concerning the nature of wisdom. Nonetheless, some efforts have been made in the fields of education and psychological research to resuscitate the topic. One such researcher, already mentioned, is the psychologist Robert Sternberg. As we have seen, Sternberg is particularly discontent with the modern emphasis on increasing our “intelligence.” In his view, intelligence may be distinguished from wisdom in that “intelligence is not necessarily applied to a common good; wisdom always is.” Sternberg points out that our hypertrophied concern with measuring and increas-

ing our “intelligence” scores has caused us to lose sight of more important things: namely, that these scores do not even measure or predict our ability to effect any of the good purposes that intelligence might serve in the first place if only it were informed by wisdom. As Sternberg puts it: “On intelligence tests, there may be better and worse answers in the sense of certain answers being more justifiable on logical or other grounds. But there are not answers that are wiser or less wise. The concept simply does not apply.” With considerable poignancy, he voices his doubts about the likelihood that public concern for wisdom will ever supplant concern with intelligence:

Wisdom is neither taught in schools nor, in general, is it even discussed . . . many people will not see the value of teaching something that shows no promise of raising conventional test scores. These scores, which formerly were predictors of more interesting criteria, have now become criteria, or ends, in themselves. Society has lost track of why they ever mattered in the first place and they have engendered the same kind of mindless competition we see in people who relentlessly compare their economic achievements with those of others. . . . [W]isdom is much more difficult to develop than is the kind of achievement that can be developed and then readily tested via multiple-choice tests. . . . [P]eople who have gained influence and power in a society via one means are unlikely to want either to give up that power or to see a new criterion be established on which they do not rank as favourably.<sup>1</sup>

However, he does not give way to despair, because he sees that, implicit in the way that we think about school, lies a desire for something that resembles wisdom. He remarks that

the teaching of wise thinking has always been implicit in school curricula in any case. For example, one learns history in part so as to learn the lessons of the past and not repeat its mistakes. One learns literature in part so as to learn how to apply to one’s life the lessons literary characters have learned. So it seems a reasonable proposal to make explicit what has previously been implicit.<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing that Western education in the past couple of centuries has typically focused on imparting content knowledge and developing cognitive skills in students, Sternberg contends that “schools promote intelligent—but not necessarily wise—students.” Moreover, “these students may have admirable records in school, yet make poor judgements in their own lives and in the lives of others.” He states that “[w]e therefore believe that school should help enhance these wise

thinking skills in students.” To this end, Sternberg has designed a school-based educational program entitled “Teaching for Wisdom” that is intended to “facilitate the development of wise and critical thinking skills in middle school children through the infusion of these skills into a history curriculum based on a ‘balance theory of wisdom.’”

Sternberg’s “balance theory of wisdom” characterizes wisdom as a consideration of competing interests that strikes an appropriate balance between all the “stake holders” in order to secure the “common good.” Sternberg defines wisdom as

the application of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extra-personal interests, over the (a) short and (b) long-terms, in order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments.<sup>3</sup>

According to this rather long definition, wisdom involves balancing the interests of self with those of others, and therefore the consideration of multiple points of view, as well as “establishing values.” The curriculum developed by Sternberg to cultivate wisdom emphasizes that instructors teach “children not *what* to think, but, rather, *how* to think.” For Sternberg, this involves encouraging “reflective thinking” among the students, or “thinking about thinking”—otherwise known as “metacognition.” Sternberg also asserts the importance of teaching both “dialogical” and “dialectical thinking.” By “dialogical thinking” he means complex problem solving that involves the consideration and balancing of several points of view. By “dialectical thinking,” he means something like a Hegelian dialectic, or the integration of two opposite points of view—a thesis and an antithesis—to formulate a synthesis. In the main, his “Balance Curriculum” is a history curriculum; it looks to historical events as case studies and challenges students in middle school to figure out the implications of events. The idea is that, by considering history, students will not be doomed to repeat it.

Alongside these basic teaching strategies, all of which suggest that “teaching for wisdom is not accomplished through a didactic method of ‘imparting’ information about wisdom and subsequently assessing students with multiple choice questions,” but rather demands the active engagement of students in experiencing the “various cognitive and affective processes that underlie wise decision-making,” Sternberg offers six “procedures” for teaching wisdom. These are: (1) encouraging students to read classical literature and philosophy; (2) challenging students to engage with these readings in various ways; (3) studying not only truth but “values”; (4) emphasis on identifying the “common good” in learning situations; (5) looking always to the final end of actions and recognizing how anything can be abused; (6) encouraging teachers to be aware of themselves as role models.

There are several areas of Sternberg's analysis of wisdom that ought to be more carefully questioned and considered. First, Sternberg's entire project is premised upon the assumption that wisdom can be taught: that wise thinking is a "skill." There are considerable reasons to doubt whether this is in fact the case. Second, Sternberg's elucidation of wisdom as a "balancing of interests" and as involving the establishing of "values" is unclear. In a simpler definition of wisdom that Sternberg uses when he is not specifically arguing to defend his "balance theory," he contends that wisdom is "the power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, and understanding."<sup>4</sup> This definition sits well with the long-standing tradition of viewing wisdom as an excellence in the practical sphere of doing, often called prudence. However, Sternberg's "balance theory" and his discussions of wisdom make no mention at all of what is classically termed "theoretical" as opposed to "practical" wisdom or prudence: in ancient parlance, *sophia* as opposed to *phronesis*. It seems that an entire realm of investigation concerning the nature of wisdom and its role in education is overlooked by Sternberg.

His silence in this regard may have something to do with his demand that "Teaching for Wisdom" encourage students to "establish" or to create "values." This use of the word *value* is a late-nineteenth-century invention, and it is diametrically opposed to ancient thought, wherein human beings did not create or establish the "value" of such things, but rather discovered, saw, or recognized the essential nature of things through meditative attention and love directed at seeing "the whole" or "the universal," as Marcel calls it. Often, this deeper realization of essence or being would be cultivated through contemplation or *theoria* (which, as we shall see, is why *sophia* is important). It seems, if we reflect back upon Marcel's recollection standing in the ruins of Vienna, that Sternberg is like the individual who laments the loss of the buildings (i.e.: "How could we allow our science and technology to wreak such havoc upon Europe?"), but feels no sense of loss at the absence of reverence that generated the event in the first place.



Patricia Arlin argues thoughtfully, somewhat like Sternberg, that wisdom cannot be detected in student learning or cultivated in teaching practises that focus on finding the right answers—especially to the sorts of questions asked in intelligence testing. Rather, Arlin suggests that wisdom is best sought out by asking good questions and looking for interesting and engaging problems. Indeed, Arlin links the asking of questions to a more ancient sort of knowing, namely, "self-knowledge" and a Socratic knowledge of one's own ignorance. In this regard, she remarks, "Knowing what one does not know can be represented by the questions one asks."<sup>5</sup>

Like Sternberg, this author left me with several unanswered questions and problems to ponder about her understanding of wisdom and its implications.

First, I was left wondering how difficult Arlin's pedagogic challenge to encourage questions rather than answers might be for parents, government masters, administrators, students, and teachers to bear, particularly when they expect pat answers and high test scores. For instance, to what extent do parents *not* want philosophers (those who aren't wise but seek wisdom) but rather sophists (those who claim to be wise and also claim to be able to teach others to become wise) as the teachers for their children? Don't parents mostly want their child's teacher to be someone who will help him or her to be a successful speaker and doer? How many would actually be concerned with making their children into questioners, particularly if their questioning negatively affected future job prospects or worldly successes? How willing are parents to acknowledge that education involves doubt and discomfort, and to affirm the importance of these experiences rather than blaming the teacher? Wouldn't pursuing wisdom in this fashion lead to persecution of the philosopher?

A second quandary arises for me when Arlin offers up a long list of aptitudes and abilities in asking questions and finding problems that she says are a "necessary but not sufficient condition for wisdom." These include the "search for complementarity," the "detection of asymmetry in the face of that which appears symmetrical and in equilibrium," "openness to change: its possibility and its reality, a pushing of the limits, which sometimes leads to a redefinition of those limits," "a sense of taste for problems that are of fundamental importance," and "the preference for certain conceptual moves." Arlin herself acknowledges the difficulty: one can be trained as a problem finder; one can have aptitudes at finding problems and naturally driven to ask good questions; but this does not mean that one is wise, nor does it mean that one necessarily even seeks after wisdom.

After reading this list, I was reminded of Socrates's dialogue with Plato's brothers, Glaukon and Adeimantus in the *Republic*. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates and the others are always searching for justice. Time and time again, they stumble upon "a footprint" or "a track" of justice, but they never quite find what it is, tossing around definitions of justice such as "to keep one's promises," "to mind one's own business," and "that friends ought to have all things in common." None of these definitions truly suits or encapsulates what is justice. So when I look at Arlin's elucidation of wisdom I am left with a similar perplexity; it seems that the nature of wisdom, the precise thing that she and the others in this research review are trying to find, has escaped her notice.



The late Paul B. Baltes and his colleagues in the Max Planck Institute Group remark on their dissatisfaction with the manner in which wisdom has been investigated until their method of study was applied to inquiry into its nature. They write: "Whereas philosophers provide eloquent and insightful commentaries about the nature, function, and ontology of wisdom, they rarely devise ways to test their

proposals empirically.”<sup>6</sup> Baltes and the members of the Max Planck Institute Group therefore attempt to apply quantitative-analytic and statistical research methods to questions concerning the nature of wisdom. Essentially, their ambition is to build a model of what wisdom looks like given what people say about it. Having devised a model or paradigm of wisdom based upon these suggestions and ideas about wisdom, their aim is, next, to see to what extent people they interview embody the particular elements of their paradigm. Baltes and his colleagues admit that “[d]efining and operationalizing the concept of wisdom as a scientifically grounded psychological construct is not easy. Wisdom may be beyond what psychological methods and concepts can achieve.”<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, they proceed to construct their paradigm of wisdom, which has become known in the literature as “The Berlin Paradigm.” This paradigm defines wisdom as

an expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life. These include knowledge and judgment about the meaning and conduct of life and the orchestration of human development toward excellence while attending conjointly to personal and collective well-being.<sup>8</sup>

By “the fundamental pragmatics of life,” Baltes and the others mean not only “excellence in mind and virtue,” but also “expert knowledge dealing with the conduct and understanding of life.” The developers of the Berlin Paradigm explain that all of the components of wisdom can be fitted into two “tiers.” In the first or top tier, they place “Factual” and “Strategic” knowledge about “the fundamental pragmatics of life.” “Factual” knowledge of these pragmatics, they claim, is similar to Aristotle’s notion of “theoretical wisdom” (*sophia*), whereas “Strategic” or “procedural” knowledge about these fundamental pragmatics is likened to Aristotle’s exposition of “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*). However, according to the Berlin Group, Aristotle’s divisions of wisdom into theoretical and practical categories are insufficient; as a result, they have included a second, lower tier of “post-Aristotelian philosophical perspectives on wisdom.” These “three metacriteria” are “lifespan contextualism” (or, “knowledge about the contexts of life and how these change over time”), “value relativism” (that is: “knowledge which considers the relativism of values and life goals”), and “knowledge about the fundamental uncertainties of life and ways to manage” this uncertainty.<sup>9</sup> Having constructed this model, the researchers next seek to operationalize it by presenting people with difficult hypothetical situations that require the exercise of wisdom. Those being interviewed are encouraged to think aloud while “trained raters” evaluate their responses according to the five criteria that comprise the wisdom paradigm.

I have serious reservations about this manner of investigating the nature of wisdom. First, at its core, the model developed by the Berlin researchers is primarily an exercise in polling opinions about what people—in this case, psychologists—

consider to be wisdom. Their model is not dialectically tested in the classical or philosophical sense, which means that, as a model for wisdom, it is not held to the rigors expected of one who genuinely engages in the pursuit of wisdom. Indeed, if the Berlin Group studies are truly indicative of the nature of wisdom, one wonders why Socrates did not simply content himself with polling the people of Athens about wisdom, pooling the results (perhaps preserving only the opinions of the most elite Athenians of his day), and then treating those characteristics as the true measure for what is wisdom. The presumed legitimacy of the Berlin method seems to rest upon testing whether or not this paradigm measures as “wise” those public or historical figures “who were nominated by an expert panel as being wise—independently of our own definition of wisdom.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is telling that clinical psychologists showed higher levels of wisdom-related performance when they themselves were asked questions and assessed according to a paradigm designed by clinical psychologists.

Second, I am a bit perplexed about the notion of trained “wisdom raters” who mechanically apply rigid criteria from a paradigm based on the ideas of a few psychologists. The process of choosing who will be found as wise and who will not raises all sorts of questions for me. Can an unwise or nonwise person tell a wise person from an unwise person? Could the “trained wisdom raters” themselves be unwise and yet still be good judges? Can the characteristics of a wise person be so readily discerned by anyone if there are clear and rigid stipulations concerning the character and qualities of wisdom? Could one even hope to isolate such qualities?

Third, at one point the researchers group all “theories” of wisdom into two categories. On the one hand, they collect all cultural-historical, philosophical, and folk-psychological statements about wisdom under the label of “implicit theories.” These theories, they contend, articulate “how the term ‘wisdom’ is used in everyday language and how wise persons are characterized.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, “explicit psychological theories” such as those of the Berlin Group, Erikson, or Piaget are said to “go beyond the characterization of wisdom and a wise person in terms of language-based descriptions,” since they “lend themselves to empirical inquiry in terms of quantifiable operationalization.” Their division between “implicit” and “explicit” theories seems to be a way of distinguishing nonscientific from scientific theories. But it is worth asking whether or not these groupings make sense. Why, for instance, is philosophic investigation of the nature of wisdom not considered “scientific”? Does not philosophy seek to know or proceed by its own methods toward its object? And inasmuch as the empirical is what can be known and validated by attention to experience, is not philosophic investigation empirical? Perhaps the ambition to “quantify” wisdom rather than to isolate it qualitatively is the primary difference between “implicit” and “explicit” theoretization. But then the question still remains as to how one can “quantify” wisdom (i.e., say how wise somebody is on a Likert scale) without first establishing dialectically what wisdom actually is.



Fourth, the notion that wisdom is “expert knowledge” about the “fundamental pragmatics of life” is mystifying. “Expert knowledge” concerns particular objects of understanding. One can be, for instance, an expert carpenter or an expert shoemaker. In fact, the ancients frequently pointed out that the word *wisdom* is often used in this sense, to indicate “expert knowledge” in a specific area of skill or study or endeavor. However, to suppose that “the fundamental pragmatics of life” are akin to such a specific area of inquiry in which it is possible to be an “expert” seems rather dubious. These assumptions about the nature of wisdom require more careful consideration.

Fifth, I find the claim made by the researchers to have outdone Aristotle in their conceiving of the nature of wisdom a bit tenuous. Their claim to have encapsulated either what Aristotle meant by *sophia* or *phronesis* is unpersuasive, particularly when they posit the need to include three “post-Aristotelian” “metacriteria” to account for elements of wisdom not taken into consideration by Aristotle. How is it that anyone on Aristotle’s account would be considered prudent *without* a knowledge that life situations are “contextual”? And how is it that Aristotle would have no understanding of the “uncertainties” of life, when both *phronesis* and *sophia* are dependent upon such an awareness? In fact, why would the researchers choose to divorce either an awareness of contextualism or uncertainties from their conceptions of *sophia* and *phronesis* in the “top tier” of their model?

Sixth, the third “metacriterion” for wisdom’s “system” is “value relativism.” This idea is not amenable to any conception of *sophia* as far as I understand it, and as far as Aristotle has written about it. Baltes and the group members are open about their repudiation of the ancient conception of wisdom; they contend that there is a “plurality of wisdom as it is constructed by humans for humans,” and they state that “the idea that there is but one ‘good life’ to which all humans aspire is acknowledged as utopian.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, in their view, there is no *summum bonum* in the ancient sense, or in Marcel’s sense of a “universal” that ought to be revered and held in esteem as the source and ground of *sophia*, and as the “common good” toward which all human beings are by their nature designed to seek in order to live a good life. Wisdom, in the view of the researchers, is a “human construct,” and the wise person is not the one who genuinely seeks beyond all opinions about wisdom for wisdom itself, but rather one who has the ability to “define and select those goals and means that are socially acceptable and desirable in human development.” Wisdom becomes, on the grounds of value-neutrality, the means of securing whatever ends are deemed culturally and socially acceptable. So again, it is mystifying that the researchers would claim that their notion of wisdom is in any way “similar” to Aristotle’s.

Finally, even if all of my reservations are from the standpoint of an outsider in the field of statistical analytic inquiry into the nature of wisdom, there are still other researchers from within this methodological approach that are skeptical about the value of the Berlin model. Michael J. Chandler and Stephen Holliday,

for instance, voice their own concerns about Baltes's work on wisdom by referring to a problem isolated by John Kekes known as "the Polonius Syndrome." Simply put, "A fool can learn to say all the things a wise man says and to say them on the same occasions." Consequently, when the "wisdom raters" are conducting their interviews, how do they know that the man or woman sitting before them is not simply spilling platitudes like Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* rather than actually speaking from a place of wisdom? Can't the wise man and the fool say the same things on the same occasions?



Chandler and Holliday offer up several other insights about the peculiarities of our modern understanding of wisdom. Perhaps thinking of their colleagues in the Berlin Group, they write that, "Modernity . . . has taken a rather jaundiced view of wisdom, seeing the classic quest after its meaning as a kind of fool's errand." Among the reasons they detect for "this modern eclipse of the study of wisdom," they note the tendency to equate the whole of human knowledge with the sum of those empirical facts obtained through applications of the methods of natural science inquiry. Second, they point out that all consideration of wisdom as an "indwelling state" has been largely dismissed as metaphysical speculation. Nonetheless, Chandler and Holliday are keenly attuned in their own research to the importance of these "indwelling states." In this regard, they offer a provocative example that raises problems with the Berlin mode of "testing" for wisdom:

Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, on his deathbed, is filled with terminal self-doubt but skillful in the performance of his official duties until the end: cheerful, worldly, sociable, clever, expert Ivan, tragically uncertain that his life was really a life worth living.<sup>13</sup>

The problem being isolated here with regard to understanding wisdom is: Do we really know wisdom based on its effects? Is wisdom the same thing as its effects? Isn't it the case that a man (Polonius) can say wise things and give off the effect of appearing wise, but in fact, be a fool? And isn't it the case that a man (Ivan) could act well and be successful by all outward measures, but inwardly be wretchedly unhappy? In the view of these authors, "The efforts of Baltes and his colleagues . . . still suffer an eventual contortion back into the shape of limited technical expertise." The supposed insights of this group concerning the relation of wisdom to practical knowledge and its emphasis upon the pragmatic resolution of life issues "seems to devolve back into another only slightly modified species of other predominantly technical accounts of possible knowledge according to which wisdom amounts to no more than the simple accumulation of esoteric information or expertise, where the good life is confounded with the prudent life."

Clearly, Chandler and Holliday are keenly aware of the vast shortcomings of quantitative or “explicit” theories of wisdom, and they have isolated something important about our “jaundiced” modern view of wisdom—namely, that in order to understand what wisdom is, we must not simply look to its appearance and its effects, but as Marcel would have us do, begin to look with some degree of reverence again toward “the universal.”



John Kekes’s work figures prominently in the insights of Chandler and Holliday concerning wisdom as discussed above. These insights are, primarily, that one cannot simply identify wisdom in others on the basis of what they say (Polonius) or what they do (Ivan). However, the conclusions that Kekes draws from these two very genuine insights have not been explained or readily questioned. The first of these, which differs from the opinions of the other researchers we have investigated thus far in our study (Sternberg, most notably), is that “wisdom cannot be taught.” Kekes writes:

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 clichés. It takes time to acquire wisdom and a person must do it himself. The most a wise man can do in the way of teaching others is to remind them of the facts whose significance they should realize, if they want wisdom. The realization, however, must be theirs.<sup>14</sup>

Kekes’s warning about claiming to be able to teach wisdom is a good one and is well stated; we ought to keep it in mind as we read this book and continue in our own search for wisdom.

The second, and in my view, problematic conclusion Kekes draws from his original insights concerns the nature of *sophia* and *phronesis*. He first outlines his own understanding of the distinction between these two types of wisdom:

Theoretical wisdom [or *sophia*] is an intellectual matter having primarily to do with knowledge. Practical wisdom [or *phronesis*] is mainly action-guiding, and although it too involves knowledge, it is not the same as the kind involved in theoretical wisdom. The knowledge required for theoretical wisdom is metaphysical: it is of first principles,

of fundamental truths about reality. On the other hand, the knowledge involved in practical wisdom is of means to ends.<sup>15</sup>

His definitions of *sophia* and *phronesis* are fairly lucid and straightforward, and they follow the traditional Aristotelian distinction well enough. However, having offered up these conceptions of wisdom for consideration, Kekes's next move is to reject them:

Now what I mean by wisdom is not quite Aristotle's theoretical wisdom, nor is it exactly his practical wisdom. It is not theoretical wisdom, because I think of wisdom as action-guiding and not involving metaphysical knowledge. There are two reasons for denying that wisdom involves metaphysical knowledge. One is that such knowledge is taken to be of *a priori* truths and I do not think that there are any. . . . The second reason for denying that wisdom involves metaphysical knowledge is that the latter, if it exists, is esoteric, ascribable only to a very few, while wisdom can be possessed by anyone willing to make the arduous effort to gain it—an effort different from the one required for becoming a philosopher.<sup>16</sup>

Kekes's repudiation of *sophia*, as he explains it, arises first from his refusal to accept the possibility of "metaphysical knowledge," such as Marcel's articulation of his own experiences of being grounded in an awareness of a "universal," or ancient accounts of experiences of goodness and order and beauty being grounded in awareness of God, or the Good Itself, or the Divine Intellect (*Nous*). In his view, human beings simply cannot and do not know of any truths that "precede" experience. Second, Kekes rejects *sophia* on the grounds that it is an elitist idea of wisdom: it is the sole pursuit of philosophers, and the possession of only a few; for wisdom to have any relevance or great consequence in the world, it must not be an "esoteric" thing, but related rather more directly to the lives of every individual in society as a possibility not beyond their own capacities as human beings of ordinary intellect. However, having rejected Aristotle's notion of *sophia*, Kekes does not therefore embrace Aristotelian *phronesis* or "practical wisdom," for although this sort of wisdom is, according to Kekes's explanation, widely available as a possibility for ordinary people (and so overcomes his second objection to *sophia*), he does not see that being an effective actor and decision maker will necessarily make one happy (the Ivan Ilyich example).

Along with Aristotle's conceptions of *sophia* and *phronesis*, Kekes also dismisses what he calls the "Socratic wisdom" of realizing one's own ignorance. He calls this form of wisdom "negative" for reasons that will become apparent:

There is yet another ancient conception of wisdom from which I want to dissociate my account: the Socratic. The wisdom of Socrates consisted in realizing his own ignorance. Many of the early dialogues can be read as warning of the harm involved in the failure to realize that one lacks metaphysical knowledge; Socrates, of course, did not claim to have had it. He claimed, as I understand him, that the extent to which one has it, is the extent to which he can have a good life. Socrates might have explained his intention to Aristotle as an attempt to demonstrate how far short of wisdom falls Aristotle's yet to be identified practically wise man. The wisdom of Socrates is negative.<sup>17</sup>

Simply put, Kekes's rejection of "Socratic wisdom" concerning one's ignorance is premised upon the legitimacy of supposing that there are indeed such truths of which one might be ignorant. Kekes dismisses this claim, with the result that to believe that one is ignorant is itself ignorance of the fact that there are no "metaphysical truths" of which one might be ignorant! Kekes calls Socratic wisdom "negative" because he sees it as destroying any pretensions we might have about possessing knowledge of "metaphysical truths" while still holding us accountable to finding such will-o-the-wisps. He therefore suggests that a proper understanding of wisdom must not resign itself to the negative, but must take a "positive" form. Kekes claims his own conception of wisdom is positive, but he never really explains how.

I find many areas in Kekes's argumentation to be worthy of more serious consideration and questioning. For starters, Kekes's rejection of *sophia* must be reviewed in terms of both of his objections. First, Kekes supposes that *sophia* cannot be entertained as a realistic articulation of wisdom due to its "metaphysical" presumptions and its grounding in a "belief" in "*a priori* truth." Kekes's reaction to "metaphysics" as a kind of disingenuous dogmatism is certainly understandable. However, as the philosopher Eric Voegelin explains, the language of metaphysics was not always so hypostatized; rather, it began as the expression of certain "originary experiences" that are still available to all human beings. Voegelin writes about the manner in which these "originary experiences" that compelled people to use metaphysical language in the first place were lost when metaphysics became dogmatic, and how this dogmatism, being unpersuasive through its lack of experiential basis, resulted in a mass of skeptical philosophy<sup>18</sup>—such as Kekes's article, for example.

The way out of this problem—namely, the dilemma faced by Kekes as one who would seek to be wise without seeking out *sophia*—seems to be by questioning the whole premise that the vocabulary of metaphysics refers to "concepts" and is composed of *a priori* statements—that is, statements about things we know without experience of them. What if we are willing to recognize what Marcel saw while

standing amidst the ruins of Vienna? What if we, as human beings, are able to have an “originary *experience*” that renders metaphysical language about “the universal” or “God” or some such epithet conceivable and meaningful? Moreover, if such “originary experiences” of “metaphysical” reality are available to all human beings, then Kekes’s second reason for rejecting *sophia* and philosophy (as the pursuit of *sophia*) is also overcome; the language of philosophy need not be understood as dogmatic metaphysics if it is encountered deeply and if the “originary experiences” that gave rise to it are evoked in the one attempting to philosophize; given that speech seeking after *sophia* need not be conceived of as an elitist or specialist or “expert” vocabulary but a genuine expression of human experiences available to everyone, certainly the pursuit of *sophia* need not be considered the privilege of the few and the gifted, and strictly in the purview of “professional” philosophers. As Aristotle states at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, “By nature, all human beings seek to know”—not just philosophers! Everyone may philosophize.

If my comments on Kekes’s assessment of *sophia* are correct, then his reasons for rejecting “Socratic wisdom” are also overcome. For it stands to reason that, if the “metaphysical” knowledge sought by Socrates is not a quest for a priori truth, but rather for the ground of his (and our) “originary experiences,” then there is such a thing as “Socratic ignorance”—one can genuinely not know about realities which nonetheless exist, and yet still seek to know them through recollecting one’s participation in them as a lover or an erotic philosopher.



Charles Hartshorne’s provocative work on wisdom exerts an important influence in Meacham’s writings on wisdom, and it too offers us a challenging perspective. It is no surprise that Hartshorne’s book, *Wisdom as Moderation*, conflates two virtues (*aretai*) typically distinguished from one another: namely, wisdom (*sophia*) and moderation or “sound-mindedness” (*sophrosyne*). Hartshorne attempts to establish their identity by discussing “the good” as a mean between extremes, much like Aristotle asserts that “moral” or “ethical virtue” (*ten ethiken*) is a mean, inasmuch as it is concerned with emotions and actions, in which one can have excess or deficiency or a due mean (*to meson*). Besides examples of means in “the good” dealing with temperance with regard to the pleasures of eating, courage in response to fears, and liberality with respect to giving—classical moral virtues also discussed by Aristotle—Meacham applies his notion of “goodness as a mean” to “aesthetic matters”:

Beauty, too, is a mean. It is not the opposite to ugliness. Ugliness is an incongruity, a disorder, a jolt; but the sheer absence of incongruity and disorder is not beauty. Rather, beauty and all aesthetic value is what, in the words of Kurt Sachs the musicologist, “lies between the

fatal extremes of mechanism and chaos.” By ‘mechanism,’ understand a too strict and unrelenting orderliness, and by ‘chaos,’ a sheer lack of order. In the first case there is too little surprise, sense of tension, or interest in how things may come out; in the second case there are no definite expectations to be met with pleased surprise or to awaken any desire to experience the outcome. With mechanism we are merely bored, with chaos merely confused. In neither way does the sense of beauty arise.<sup>19</sup>

While the notion of “goodness as a mean” has some sense to it, understanding all goodness as a mean—and wisdom in particular—is problematic. It certainly seems to be the case that *sophrosyne* is about finding and hitting the mark of virtue somewhere in the vicinity of the middle in regard to emotions, actions, and appetites. The idea of a mean suits well any situation where there can be something negative about the extremes of deficit or surplus. Indeed, the Greek saying *pan metron ariston* advises “moderation is best in all things.” Nonetheless, while thinking about moral virtue as a mean makes sense, Aristotle *never* applied the notion of the mean to intellectual virtues such as wisdom. It is also significant that several times in various Platonic dialogues Socrates asks his interlocutors if one ought to philosophize moderately, or if one ought rather to seek the whole of wisdom.<sup>20</sup> Does the pursuit of philosophy’s ultimate object—the Lovable Itself—require a moderate and cautious “non-lover” who is always in control of himself?<sup>21</sup> Or does wisdom’s pursuit not involve a “divine” sort of madness or *mania*?<sup>22</sup> (Hint: The immoderate lover of wisdom always wins out!)

Returning then to Hartshorne’s contentions about beauty as a mean, we can make similar criticisms. While it is quite true that beauty is a kind of mean or balance from an Apollonian perspective (i.e., concerning geometric middles and proportions), it is simply not the case that beauty is a mean when we speak about Dionysian music or erotic philosophy. There is nothing middling about either the Dionysian or the erotic, dependent for their existence as they are upon mad transport and ecstatic movement, not toward a moderated or “middled” beauty, but rather reaching out to the transcendent or sublime source of beauty: to Beauty Itself.<sup>23</sup> The danger, then, in Hartshorne’s elucidation of wisdom, is that it does not consider the sublime nature of wisdom, nor does it truly account for the erotic nature of wisdom’s pursuit.

Like Hartshorne, John Meacham asserts that wisdom is a kind of mean—in this case between knowing and doubting. Wisdom involves not necessarily knowing more than other people, but rather seeing clearly the limits of what you know. For instance, Meacham writes:

Clearly two persons can hold the same objective amount of knowledge, yet the first might feel that he or she knows a substantial proportion

of all that can be known whereas the second might feel that he or she knows relatively little. . . . To be wise in one's actions is to avoid both of these extremes.<sup>24</sup>

Similar to Marcel in this regard at least, Meacham contends that wisdom operates as a kind of valuable brake on human pride in our own knowing. It is "an attitude taken by persons toward the beliefs, values, knowledge, information, abilities, and skills that are held, a tendency to doubt that these are necessarily true or valid and to doubt that they are an exhaustive set of those things that could be known." In support of his view that wisdom is a mean between knowing and doubting, Meacham says that knowing nothing at all certainly cannot be wisdom, but nor is supposing that you know everything (because you don't!); rather, wise people know what they know and what they do not know, essentially following the old adage that the more one knows, "the more one realizes the extent of what one does not know." In Meacham's estimation, "The challenge of wisdom is to avoid this easy course of merely acquiring more and more knowledge and instead to strive simultaneously to construct new uncertainties, doubts, and questions about what might be known." This statement brings us to a surprising and provocative contention in Meacham's article; namely, that *the objective of knowing seems to be to doubt what you know*.

Concurrent with this contention about knowing in order to doubt is a certain view of the way that scientific inquiry ought to be conducted. Meacham points out that scientific method always ought to admit that the facts as we have gleaned them are open to falsification; indeed, openness to falsification is the only way to avoid both extremes of dogmatism and skepticism. Meacham argues that "neither extreme resembles wisdom, although the middle course between the two . . . certainly does." While Meacham's comments about scientific method and the principle of falsification are well placed, I am still left wondering: Is the correct application of scientific method the same as pursuing wisdom? Isn't there a difference in what is sought as their respective objects? That is, it may make sense that, with respect to scientific inquiry, we seek to know in order that we may doubt what we know, inasmuch as our knowledge in any scientific discipline or study is really just a means to more knowledge and trying to gain greater understanding; because the knowledge that we seek through scientific study is never a knowing that is intrinsically valuable for its own sake, but is always a means toward some other good (e.g., happiness), then certainly it stands to reason that our knowing in the realms of scientific investigation would be but a stepping stone to doubting. However, what about when the object of our knowing is ultimate, such as *sophia*? What about when we seek knowledge of that which is good in and of itself and for itself, not simply as a means to other goods, but as the Ultimate Good? And inasmuch as philosophy is the pursuit of such a great good—namely, wisdom—can it truly be said that wisdom is a mean between knowing and doubting—for



doubting is only of value when there is a higher good or deeper truth to unfurl, no? So is it truly appropriate to suppose that scientific method and the principle of falsification apply to philosophizing? Perhaps in order to make such a contention, Meacham must first abandon his search for wisdom, inasmuch as seeking out wisdom means seeking out and maintaining hope for a Truth that is absolute, whereas for Meacham, wisdom means that “one is able to act with knowledge while simultaneously doubting.”

A second, but entertaining assertion that Meacham makes is that we can lose wisdom—that wisdom does not readily increase with age, but rather decreases. This contention is highly provocative and flies in the face of the arguments made by the other researchers we have thus far investigated, as well as much “popular wisdom” about aging. However, Meacham suggests that wisdom may be offered in popular culture as a consolation prize by the young to the old for the fact that they are old and life is less pleasant for them! Meacham presents his argument bravely: “My hypothesis is that all people are wise to begin with, as children, but that as we grow older most people lose their wisdom.” In his view, wisdom is “a quality that is maintained and preserved by only a select few over the course of life.”<sup>25</sup>

How is it that youth is the time of wisdom, according to Meacham? He begins by distinguishing between “simple” and “profound” wisdom. Contrary to developmentalists such as Piaget, Meacham contends that children are already wise in a “simple” fashion, whereas with age, if such wisdom is not forgotten through a loss of awareness concerning the limits of our own knowing, wisdom may become “profound.” However, forces are at work from an early age that tempt us to lose our “simple” awareness of the limits of our own knowing. Meacham writes:

In schools a premium is placed upon absorbing as much information as possible rather than raising questions about and critically evaluating what is already known. How often does a teacher enter the classroom intending to challenge the students’ beliefs, not merely so that false information might be replaced with presumably more valid information but so that the students might leave the class feeling less confident about their knowledge (and so more wise)? Instead, the emphasis is upon knowing rather than doubting, and so the easy course of movement is away from wisdom toward the extreme of believing that one knows all, or at least enough.<sup>26</sup>

Meacham’s view suggests that, in the main, the way that we currently educate our children (and expect them to be educated) destroys any “simple” wisdom that they might have concerning the fallibility of their own knowledge; current pedagogy even renders students hostile toward the pursuit of wisdom. However, implicit in his contention is also the suggestion that we *could* indeed teach in such a way as to promote wisdom in our classrooms.

Meacham does not appear willing to blame school practices alone for the loss of wisdom in our educational institutions. He recognizes larger social forces and expectations at work in the way we value material gain, honor, and success as adults:

Bigness and power do not guarantee goodness or wisdom, although they might provide us with a sense of importance. It is easy to mistake the accumulation of information, power, and importance for wisdom because the more power one has, the less likely are other people to challenge one's apparent wisdom. . . . [O]ne of the functions of wisdom was to guard against the excessive pride that can follow from successful mastery and control. In short, one reason why wisdom decreases as one grows older is that increasing age generally brings more information, more experience, more power, greater success, and so forth, and all of these carry with them the risk of loss of wisdom through excessive confidence in knowing.<sup>27</sup>

While much of Meacham's argumentation about wisdom as a brake on human pride makes sense and coincides with what Marcel says in *The Decline of Wisdom*, I find one of his final contentions about wisdom suspicious. Namely, Meacham argues that a "wisdom atmosphere" is necessary for the cultivation of wisdom, and that, in particular, it is essential that such an atmosphere be free from tragedy.<sup>28</sup> Tragedy is thought to impede wisdom, which, in his view, requires an atmosphere of safety wherein it is easy to avoid the "extremes" of too confident knowing and paralyzing doubt.

These remarks strike me as suspicious given the ancient conception of tragedy articulated by the Greeks. In Greek thought, suffering is considered essential for the development of wisdom. Eric Voegelin has written incisively about the manner in which tragedy was used as a vehicle for the cultivation of wisdom among the Greeks. He remarks that the truth of the tragedy is action itself, that is, "the movement of the soul that culminates in the decision (*proairesis*) of a mature, responsible man." In Voegelin's view, tragedy is a form of study of the human soul in the process of making decisions. The decisions illustrated in Greek tragedies concern matters of justice, and Voegelin points out that there is normally a discrepancy between what the law (*themis*) states as being just and what is ultimately just (*dike*): "Beyond the order of *themis* with its conflicts, there lies an order of *dike*, in the double sense of a higher law and of concrete decisions. The situation that is not covered by *themis* will have to be ordered by a concrete decision, a dike, of ultimate rightness."<sup>29</sup> It is then up to the solitary individual to reach deep down into the depths of his or her soul to render a decision that establishes *dike*.

Voegelin speaks of this decision-making process as a "Dionysian descent into man, to the depth where Dike is to be found." In his view, conduct only becomes tragic action when "man is forced into the recourse to Dike. Only in that case is

he faced with the dilemma expressed by the line ‘to act or not to act.’<sup>30</sup> Now, all this doesn’t suggest that what Meacham means by a tragedy-free “wisdom atmosphere” is the same as what the Greeks meant by tragedy. Indeed, the word *tragedy*, as we use it today, is often applied to horrible car accidents, murders, suicides, the death of a young person, or a catastrophic, unfathomable “act of God.” We use the word *tragedy* whenever some form of suffering offends our sense of justice in the extreme. By contrast, Voegelin would contend that, in Greek understanding, all these nasty things—even put together—do not constitute the meaning of tragedy. Greek tragedy certainly entails the suffering of nasty things because, as Voegelin says, man must be forced into the recourse to Dike by a dilemma. The suffering involved in the development of tragic wisdom is necessary. However, the insights of tragedy are by no means guaranteed by the occurrence of nasty events, nor simply by the need to make difficult decisions in and of themselves. Rather, tragic wisdom arises when the soul descends deep into its own depths through a Dionysiac transport to find the order of Dike or divine justice therein.

Tragic wisdom arises, according to Greek experience, from seeing and therefore knowing the ground of all order in the universe. Given the possibility for this terrible yet profound wisdom, one wonders if Meacham’s trade-off to establish a safe and tragedy-free atmosphere might be too little accommodating to genuine engagement with the depth of reality that the pursuit of wisdom demands. If one is made insulated and safe from the “extremes” of experience—and this is Meacham’s project, for he seeks “the median of wisdom”—how much of the depths, let alone the heights of inquiry and pursuit after wisdom is one really offered? If the word *wisdom* itself is not simply metaphysical jargon, but rather an expression of an “originary experience” of reality, how are students served by being insulated and protected from such experiences and seeing, and prevented from following her into whatever dark place she might be hiding?



Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Kevin Rathu call themselves “evolutionary hermeneuticists.”<sup>31</sup> By using this term to describe their approach to the study of wisdom, they mean that when they inspect the various meanings of the term *wisdom* throughout history, they pay particular attention to those conceptions that have had considerable longevity, and that have “served people best over the years”; the authors then aspire to track how these concepts and ideas have been adapted to present understandings. Csikszentmihalyi and Rathu isolate what they refer to as the three general “dimensions” of wisdom as it has been discussed and pursued through history; namely, wisdom as a “cognitive process,” as a “virtue,” and as a “good state” or a “personal good.”

First, discussing wisdom as a cognitive process, the authors point out that the term *wisdom* has not traditionally designated knowing that concerns itself

with the appearance of fleeting phenomena, but rather with enduring universal truths; wisdom in this regard is not a kind of specialized expertise but rather an attempt to apprehend how the various aspects of reality are related to each other; and contrary to what Baltes and the Berlin Group contend, Csikszentmihalyi and Rathu point out that wisdom is not a “value-free” way of knowing; the term *wisdom* necessarily implies a hierarchical ordering of truths and actions directed at those truths. Nonetheless, they note, “In contemporary discussions on wisdom, as in contemporary discussions on almost any human way of knowing, one would seldom come across such integrative notions as ‘universal truth’ or ‘God.’” Moreover, as “evolutionary hermeneuticists,” the authors—unlike Gabriel Marcel—do not voice any degree of dismay at this situation, but rather agree to discard whatever modern thought has not embraced from the ancients, understanding these particular attitudes toward wisdom as aspects of the concept that have not survived: “We shall focus on the commonalities instead, in the belief that those aspects of a meme that remain the same despite great changes in the social and cultural milieu are the ones that will have the more enduring consequences for human survival.” In order to maintain wisdom’s overarching or hierarchical flavor and primacy over the other sciences and realms of knowing, the authors offer up a definition of wisdom as “the systematic pursuit of the connection between the branches [of knowledge]—a ‘science of the whole.’”

Second, and following from the idea of wisdom as a “mode of knowledge” is the contention that “wisdom becomes the best guide for what is the *summum bonum*, or ‘supreme good.’” As a kind of knowing of “the whole,” “wisdom helps the person decide what is the optimal course of action for his or her own self.” Wisdom is therefore understood to serve the function of “the foremost public virtue” in its ability to attain the good. However, the researchers remark that “the findings of modern psychology and the social sciences in general now can be seen as casting grave doubts on this ancient belief that ‘truth shall set you free.’” When demarcating wisdom as a virtue, the researchers make a valuable observation about some omissions from its body of meanings in modern understanding: “Here again, as in the case of searching for universal truth, it seems apparent . . . that modern sensibilities have completely abandoned the hope, as well as Plato’s suggestion that a compelling ethics will follow from the contemplation of Truth.” Among many ancient writers it was thought that knowledge of the good was enough to ensure good action and good behavior; it was thought that nobody knowingly chooses to do anything bad; we only act to achieve bad ends out of ignorance—thinking either that what we are doing is really good when it is in fact bad, or else ranking the good that we achieve by our actions as a higher good than it is in reality. This basic view is several times discussed in Plato’s dialogues; it is also at the heart of Hindu Samkhya philosophy in its emphasis on liberating the self from suffering through insight; and again, it is present in Nagarjuna’s Madhyamika philosophy