

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.

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. . . .

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

