

Review by Ronald J. Hustedde

The hegemony of technical or instrumental-driven knowledge in university education and the professions is coming under increasing attack. Critics argue that something is missing. The focus on rules and procedures minimizes opportunities for moral-driven reasoning and action. It is compounded by the market-driven emphasis on results and production that has diminished the time and need for reflection about the values of what the professions should or should not do on a day-to-day basis. As a result, many of those in the time-honored professions such as law, medicine, and teaching face days with big checklists that don't address the more complex questions about the uncertainties and the messiness of practice. Where is meaning or balance?

Barry Schwartz, a psychologist, and Kenneth Sharpe, a political scientist, have addressed this gap in their book, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*. They have joined other contemporary authors who are updating and reexamining Aristotle's *phronesis* as a reply to this gap.

They draw upon Aristotle's (1999) classic book, *Nicomachean Ethics*, along with observations about contemporary institutions to argue that excessive management practices, rules, and incentives for accountability, efficiency, and good performance cannot replace *phronesis*. They call it "practical wisdom."

Practical wisdom involves an understanding about the aims of activities in which one is engaged. It's about improvising and balancing conflicting aims and interpreting rules and procedures in a particular context. It's about taking on the perspective of others and learning how the other person feels. Practical wisdom is about blending emotions and values with reason to do the right thing. The authors suggest practical wisdom is learned through experiences; it is not taught in a conventional way.

The authors use case studies to explore the hostile climate that hinders practical wisdom and professional judgment. They cite the standardization of teaching that makes it difficult for a teacher to adequately respond with professionalism to the shifting learning needs of her students from various cultures and circumstances.

The authors investigated another case about how a judge's practical wisdom was hindered by the 1987 Federal Sentencing Reform

Act. The authors contend the Act prioritized uniformity and retribution over the balance for rehabilitation and deterrence. Judges left the bench or retired early because there wasn't much freedom to use practical wisdom when making decisions. The authors build a persuasive argument that the professions are being demoralized in ways that limit and discourage practitioners from using practical wisdom. They cite research that indicates psychic numbing and ethical erosion is taking place. In essence, rules and procedures can maintain high standards, but they can also be too strict, too detailed, and even destructive. Similar arguments were developed by Max Weber (2002) in his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Although Weber noted there were positive effects of bureaucracies, he argued that increased rationalization, control, and efficiency was dehumanizing and would create an "iron cage" in which individual freedom and decision making would be limited in a technically ordered and rigid society.

The last two chapters of the book provide sources of hope for counterattacking the detailed rules and procedures that block practical wisdom. There are more stories about teachers, judges, medical providers, and others who have challenged the system or built new structures and institutions to reintegrate *phronesis* into professional life. Drug courts and veterans' courts have emerged that balance justice with practical wisdom. Medical schools are no longer focusing exclusively on technical knowledge but are exposing medical students to empathetic experiences and listening skills associated with practical wisdom. Post-law training programs have emerged to help lawyers balance the tensions associated with corporate practice and social justice.

The authors assert that contemporary psychology links the exercise of practical wisdom with long-term happiness. Discretion, variety in work, belief in the purpose of the enterprise, and meaning are the keys. The authors tend to focus more on individuals and their power to influence systems, but they don't explore collective practical wisdom. Was the dismantlement of the highly rational Soviet bloc system a form of collective *phronesis*? The authors don't discuss the limitations of practical wisdom for the collective. What determines whether a collective is wise or unwise?

Aristotle wrote for the elites of his day, in which there were sharp divisions between men and women and slaves and free men. The book is couched in a similar vein with an almost exclusive focus on professions. It doesn't explore how *phronesis* is applied to more pressing contemporary issues such as racism, class consciousness, or sexism. One could argue that feminist theories incorporate

phronesis because they tend to highlight the emotions, value-laden questions, and experiences of women to understand and address public issues. In essence, we could draw upon feminist approaches towards the social sciences as a link that could further the integration of practical wisdom into higher education and engagement.

There is ample room for further research in this area. The authors don't cite examples from innovative firms, groups, and communities that appear to be integrating practical wisdom into day-to-day practices. Is it easier for practical wisdom to emerge in counter-culture movements? What can be learned from these sectors? Is practical wisdom illusory? How is manifested? Are there skills and knowledge associated with practical wisdom? How is it acquired? Special attention should be directed towards higher education outreach and engagement. It isn't clear what is the cutting edge of practical wisdom in university settings and how faculty and students may or may not be incorporating it into learning patterns. Do multidisciplinary or post-disciplinary academic coalitions with more fluid boundaries provide more opportunities for practical wisdom to emerge?

For the most part, the book focuses on the professions with relatively little exploration of how practical wisdom emerges from communities. Are there grassroots groups that are more prone to nurture practical wisdom in their leaders? What distinguishes them from other groups? What insights can be learned from them?

Practical Wisdom should be a welcome perspective to those engaged in higher education and outreach because it challenges the domination of instrumental knowledge against values-driven knowledge. It raises uncomfortable questions about our practices of *phronesis* in our disciplines and academic homes.

References

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About the Reviewer

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