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Georges Potworowski
Editors

Teaching for Wisdom

Cross-cultural Perspectives
on Fostering Wisdom

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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
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Georges Potworowski

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University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

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Michel Ferrari
Ontario Institute for Studies
in Education
University of Toronto
ON, Canada
mferrari@oise.utoronto.ca

Georges Potworowski
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor
MI, USA
potworowski@yahoo.com

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Preface

The chapters in this volume are all devoted to a single question: Can wisdom be taught, or at least fostered? They span many different traditions and times, which generates both problems and opportunities. The most obvious problem is that of translation. As Curnow points out in the opening chapter, the word 'wisdom' is used to translate a variety of terms from antiquity that have only a partial overlap with modern work. It is interesting to consider that the Egyptian word 'seboyet' translates as either wisdom or instruction. The same is true of terms from Buddhism or Confucianism, or even the Ancient Greek tradition acknowledged as a source of most current views of wisdom in the West; all the terms drawn from other languages and traditions have only partially overlapping meaning. With this in mind, each chapter can be read independently of the others. However, we have also arranged them in an order that reflects common themes that emerge despite this diversity. We have not arranged them by geographical region, or historical time, but rather by the sort of educational strategy they advocate to foster wisdom.

The first chapter by **Curnow** provides a basic overview of approaches to teaching for wisdom in the West. This is already a very ambitious undertaking, spanning ancient Egypt and Mespotamia to the renaissance and the dawn of the modem world, where the term wisdom has fallen largely out of fashion until very recently. Curnow is able to identify very different strands of what is considered wisdom, echoed by others in later chapters. It is possible to see similarities even to Eastern and African traditions that he does not address. In particular, he notes a tension between wisdom as knowledge or insight about the *world* and wisdom as insight about how to live a *good life*. In some traditions, like the Stoics, an effort is made to unite these two strands. We also find a range of approaches to teachng for wisdom that are echoed and amplified in the following chapters.

The second chapter by **Stange and Kunzmann** presents a scientific approach to investigating this rich and varied tradition, attempting to assess wisdom (or 'wisdom-related knowledge') using experimental methods. In particular, they present an explicit theory of wisdom, the Berlin Paradigm, and empirical work showing that this model can identify people (not always older) who are wiser, and can explain what distinguishes those nominated as wiser from others. Studies of 'the seeds of wisdom' have important implications for teaching for wisdom developed in the chapter; In particular, that wisdom in adolescence is related to openness to experience and general knowledge. The social aspect of wisdom is emphasized, with

studies showing that people who can talk things over with others, or even with themselves, do better on tasks (problem vignettes) that according to this model assess for 'wisdom-related knowledge', suggesting that such activity allows them to better access wisdom-relevant knowledge.

Sternberg, Jarvin and Reznitskaya, describe a middle school curriculum designed to teach for wisdom based on Sternberg's 'balance theory of wisdom'. Sternberg's theory shares many of the same intuitions about wisdom as the Berlin model. Indeed, both seem to be modern instances of the Greek view that wisdom is a marriage of knowledge and virtue—that folly is a product of ignorance about what matters in life and how to solve life's problems. Using modern cognitive science findings about curriculum design, Sternberg proposes an infused curriculum that adapts history units to encourage students to learn to live a more just and engaged life today.

Park and Peterson take a very different tack, emphasizing a second aspect of wisdom—character development. In some ways, this is implicit in the previous approaches that try to engage students in ways that will promote the virtues that Park and Peterson advocate, but they make a critical point that it may be better to teach the components of wisdom by fostering *Values In Action*, rather than teaching wisdom itself. And those components have less to do with (or not just to do with) depth of knowledge, but also with developing the sorts of personalities that allow people to live a happy and satisfied life.

Reeve, Messina, and Scardamalia have a very similar aim to Sternberg's Balanced Curriculum, but adopt a very different approach. Scardamalia's contention is that wisdom refers to a very deep and personally meaningful understanding of a particular knowledge domain. She and her colleagues believe that such deep understanding is not best fostered through set exercises like those proposed by Sternberg or Peterson, or by most other school curricula, which are centered around tasks. Rather, it requires students to focus on improving their understanding of ideas by generating their own tasks and methods for improving ideas. This knowledge building is not a simple matter of letting children run free, but rather involves scaffolding them to understand that knowledge is developed within communities in answer to questions that matter to them, based on a careful examination of the evidence for and against ideas. Importantly, this chapter shows that computer supported collaborative learning is not merely old curricular activity in a new medium, it is a very exciting new way to educate for wisdom in children as early as the first grade.

Scardamalia hopes to transform public education in North America. **Berthrong's** chapter focuses on the life and thought of one of the great educational reformers of all time: Zhu Xi. Master Zhu, as he was later known, made a concerted effort throughout his lifetime to arrange the teachings of Chinese Confucianism and comment on them, so as to make these teachings for wisdom available to everyone, even those far from centers of learning with no access to teachers. His commentaries were so influential they became required reading for state exams in China for centuries. In this tradition, wisdom was only one of the important virtues to be cultivated in order to become an exemplary person.

Zhu Xi developed his approach to teaching Confucianism partly in response to the rival traditions of Taoism and Buddhism. However, **Shen's** chapter shows that

talk of 'Buddhism' is very misleading, in that at any given historical time we find many competing schools even within a single current of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, itself but one branch of Buddhst philosophy worldwide. In particular, Shen focuses on three competing schools: the 'consciousness-only' School (*Weishi*—faithful to the Indian Yogacara tradition), the three-treatises school (*Sanlun*), and the *Chan* School (later inspiring Japanese Zen)—each increasingly hospitable to the Chinese mind and each with its own methods of promoting wisdom. This diversity in teaching for wisdom is still true of Buddhist schools and those of other traditions today, including modern science.

While this diversity is true, according to **Rosch**, it is important to consider the deep underlying similarities that unite these schools not only within Buddhism but even across religious and philosophical traditions. An important unifying theme is that developing wisdom requires a radical transformation of lived experience, one that occurs in identifiable stages. Rosch shows how both Tibetan Buddhism and Sufism require practitioners to overcome preconceived notions and expertise and return to a 'beginner's mind'. Only then can people enter on a path that will lead to wisdom, a path that is in many ways self-secret, because only the mind that is prepared can appreciate the teachings that advance one along that path.

In her chapter, **Bright** shows that the notion of beginner's mind and stages of personal transformation is very much a part of the Christian tradition as well. But Christianity has an additional dimension—*obedience*, or giving up our own will in the service of God. We see that within the Christian tradition, it is not a matter of 'learning' or mastery of some set of skills, or of shaping the personality in a certain way, of stripping away layers of personality to arrive at a more profound and basic connection to the universe and the spirit of God through emulating Jesus Christ. Bright focuses on specific techniques and exercises within the Christian monastic tradition that foster wisdom, especially as inspired by Augustine.

Roochnik's chapter provides an in-depth look at one of Plato's dialogues, another of the main sources of contemporary ideas about Wisdom in the West, whose ideas were often integrated into Christian traditions like that of the Augustinians. Roochnik shows how these Platonic dialogues need to be read not just for their surface information or philosophical ideas, but in light of their dramatic context. The point is that Plato thought wisdom must be taught through conversations with particular others that engage them according to their most profound beliefs. And such conversations are deeply contextualized creations, not windows onto some mystical realm of ideas, as Neo-Platonists and Christian scholars often believe.

Kresse looks at living traditions today that rely on wise advice through conversations very much like those of the historical Socrates. We see from his examples how deeply woven wisdom is into the very fabric of African Society. Something very similar to a Confucian approach is thus also seen in the African sages, in that *social engagement* is considered essential to wisdom. It is not enough to achieve some superior insight that is of personal benefit; one must also find a way to engage others and lead them to wisdom. We end the volume with the reminder that what matters for all these approaches is their pragmatic effect on people's lives.

Finally, **Ferrari** discusses some of the themes that emerged in the volume. In particular, he emphasizes the difference between expert problem-solving views of

wisdom and those based on personal transformation. In particular, Ferrari proposes that developmental theories, if they allow for a dual systems view of the human mind, can capture many important points raised by the expertise and transformative views and can provide a possible bridge between them. He ends with a consideration of whether any of these sorts of wisdom can be taught or fostered in public schools.

Michel Ferrari
Georges Potworowski

Hee, over all the Starres doth raigne,
That unto Wisdome can attaine.

From George Wither (1635). *A collection of emblems, ancient and modern*. (Book I, Illustration 31.) London: John Grismond

Contents

Part III   Learning from Wise People

Part IV   Conclusion

Introduction
Sophia's World: Episodes from the History of Wisdom

Trevor Curnow

Introduction

Can wisdom be taught? Perhaps, in the cautionary words of Effi Briest's father, 'That is *too* big a subject' (Fontane, 1967, p. 267). Nevertheless, this historical introduction will attempt to say something about how this 'too big a subject' was thought about and approached in the past. When the subject is wisdom, the past goes back a very long way, and in order to make the task manageable it has been necessary to restrict its scope in a variety of ways. Because non-western and modern approaches to wisdom are covered elsewhere in this book, I have limited myself to what can very loosely be called the Western history of wisdom, and shall have little to say about it after the modern period begins. I have further limited myself to a number of selected and illustrative episodes from this history, although I hope that they are sufficient to give some sense of continuity and coherence.

There is a further serious problem to be confronted: what *is* wisdom? In the historical context, one possible answer is that it is what the people of the different periods and places *called* wisdom. While translation is always going to be an imperfect science, there are many terms from the languages of the past that are often translated as 'wisdom'. These include *sophia* (Greek), *sapientia* (Latin), *hokhmah* (Hebrew), *nebequ* (Akkadian) and *seboyet* (Egyptian). However, while these may point to a central core of relevant material, they cannot be taken as conclusively determining the limits of the subject. History always enjoys the benefit of hindsight and it would be foolish not to take advantage of it. Consequently another possible answer to the question is that it is what *we* call wisdom, and it is possible to confuse the different answers. As Gerhard von Rad points out, the identification of a text from the distant past as a work of wisdom literature is often a matter of judgement rather than one of internal textual evidence (von Rad, 1972, p. 7), but this is easily forgotten.

In what follows it will be my aim as far as possible both to allow the sources to speak for themselves and to critically engage with them so that some kind of reflective overview of wisdom may emerge from them.

Trevor Curnow
Reader in Philosophy, University of Cumbria, Lancaster, LA1 3JD, England, UK

The Beginnings: Egypt and Mesopotamia

History begins with the advent of writing (in about 3000 BC), but there is no reason to suppose that wisdom does. Although wisdom came to be associated with certain literary genres, they do not exhaust it. Indeed, some well-known figures from wisdom's history, such as Pythagoras and Socrates, conspicuously avoided the written word altogether. The duration of wisdom's prehistory can only be a matter for speculation. The allocation of precise and secure dates to early historical developments is also problematic, making it difficult to establish either sequences or contemporaneities. This problem is further compounded in the study of wisdom by the fact that texts are sometimes internally attributed to authors long dead. Whether this reflects the preservation of a genuine tradition or an attempt to create a false one is not always easy or possible to establish. I do not therefore propose to take a narrative approach to how wisdom unfolds during the third and second millennia BC. However, if a precise chronology is elusive, at least some indications can be given of how wisdom was regarded and written about.

An obvious figure to begin with is Imhotep, thought to have been the vizier of Djoser (who ruled Egypt from 2668 to 2649 BC, or thereabouts) and the architect of the step pyramid at Saqqara. Centuries later he was identified with Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. Writers of a later period mention a book of wisdom by him, but it does not survive and its contents are unknown. Books attributed to Kagemni and Ptahhotep, said to be viziers to other third millennium BC rulers, do survive, although the actual texts are dated to no earlier than the second millennium BC. They are often referred to as books of 'instruction' rather than 'wisdom' (both of which are possible translations of *seboyet*) for two reasons. First, their contents are varied and not everything in them is easy to justify as wisdom, and secondly they typically take the form of a father's attempt to instruct his offspring on how to live. *The Instruction of Kagemni*, designed to educate his children in 'the ways of mankind' (Kaster, 1970, p. 175) begins:

> The humble man flourishes, and he who deals uprightly is praised. The innermost chamber is opened to the man of silence. Wide is the seat of the man cautious of speech, but the knife is sharp against [the one] who forces a path, that he advance not, save in due season. (Kaster, 1970, p. 174)

At the beginning of his book of instruction, Ptahhotep indicates his wish to be released from his onerous duties because of his advancing age. His aim was to make his son fit to take his place, and he wanted to 'instruct him in the discourse of those who hearken, and in the thoughts of those who have gone before, those who have served the ancestors in times past' (Kaster, 1970, p. 166).

Egyptian books of instruction are eminently practical in their contents. They aim to equip their readers for success in the world. The writers seek to pass on what they have learnt both from others and from their own experience. While some of their advice is limited in its application to the elevated social circles in which they move, they also have observations to make on life and the world in general. Sometimes the two overlap. When Ptahhotep says, 'One ought to say plainly what one knows and what one knows not' (Kaster, 1970, p. 169), the comment is made

in the specific context of a vizier giving advice to his ruler, but it clearly also has broader applications. Although relatively little is known about education in ancient Egypt, some think that books of instruction were widely used in the upbringing of the social elite, preparing them for life and their role in society. The very ability to read them would already set such individuals aside from the masses. The perceived connection between writing and wisdom was also embodied in the god Thoth who was closely associated with both. However, the books are pre-philosophical in that they do not attempt or pretend to be systematic. They present themselves more as collected scraps of advice than as articulations of coherent world-views.

This is perhaps most apparent in one of the latest and longest of the surviving books, *The Instructions of Amenemope*. These instructions aim 'to set one right on the ways of life and to cause him to prosper in the world' (Kaster, 1970, p. 179) through a list of proverbs. The extent to which proverbs were a common currency, a kind of sapiential *lingua franca*, in the ancient world is a matter of some debate. On the one hand there are clear similarities that appear to go beyond the coincidental (for example between some of the sayings of Amenemope and sections of the biblical book of *Proverbs*). On the other, there is no obvious reason why similar insights into 'the ways of mankind' could not have emerged independently in different places. When Amenemope advises, 'Keep your tongue free from evil words, and you will be liked by men' (Kaster, 1970, p. 184), he is saying something that might well have independently occurred to other people in other places at other times. What is clear, however, is that proverbs enjoyed a considerable popularity across broad swathes of the ancient world, whether they were internationally traded or not.

As vehicles for the transmission and teaching of wisdom, however, proverbs have their limitations. They may constitute distillations of wisdom, but there is more to becoming wise than consuming vast amounts of them. Without a unifying structure or context, proverbs may offer no more than fragments or glimpses of wisdom. Worse, they may contradict each other. Ptahhotep advises his son to say what he does and does not know, but later advises him not to speak unless he has something helpful to say (Kaster, 1970, p. 171).

Proverbs are also to be found in the early literature of Mesopotamia, as are books of instruction (Pritchard, 1969). However, the Sumerians additionally produced something very different, the so-called 'word list'. A word list was a kind of inventory in which words or signs, and, by implication the things they represented, were put into a particular order. As such, they can be understood as early science as much as early literature (Soden, 1994). The desire to understand the order of things appears to have been a powerful motivating force in the civilisations of ancient Mesopotamia. The Babylonians, in particular, made significant advances in both mathematics and astronomy. They were also deeply interested in the study of omens, understood as another way in which the order of the world manifested itself and could be observed.

The connections between these developments in Mesopotamia and wisdom may not appear obvious, but I believe they are important. The study of order, of 'the big picture', complements the fragmentary insights of proverbs by providing a framework into which they can be coherently integrated. What was learnt about order formed a body of knowledge that, as with proverbs, could be passed down from