

Wisdom: Advanced Creativity?¹

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In a modern university if you ask for knowledge they will provide it in almost any form – though if you ask for out-of-fashion things they may say, like people in shops, ‘Sorry, there’s no call for it’. But if you ask for Wisdom – God save us all! What a show of modesty, what disclaimers from the men and women from whose eyes shine forth intelligence like a lighthouse. Intelligence, yes, but of wisdom not so much as the gleam of a single candle.
Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels*

It would be very unwise to try to legislate for an agreed or a canonical meaning of such an ambiguous and contested term as ‘wisdom’, so I shall not try. All I can do in this short paper is to

- offer some guidelines for its exploration that I think might be productive;
- attempt to illustrate one legitimate – and I think core – sense of ‘wisdom’ through three short narratives;
- extract from those some preliminary ideas about how wise action might be conceptualised in cognitive neuroscientific terms; and
- offer some speculations about how, on this analysis, the propensity for wise action might possibly be cultivated through education.

The main point to emerge will be the suggestion that ‘wisdom’ inheres not so much in a quality of thinking or cognition, but in the nature of the underlying ‘motivational vector’ that drives cognition.

Guidelines for exploration

I think it is more productive to talk about ‘wisdom’ as being an attribute of real, specific actions in real, lived situations, than to try to define an abstract ‘quality’ that people do or don’t possess. This immediately narrows the field of enquiry in ways that some people might find too prescriptive, but which helps me focus on the practical, real-life aspect of ‘wisdom’ that I think is the most important. The classical Greeks distinguished three types of ‘wisdom’: *sophia*, *episteme* and *phronesis*. *Sophia* referred to the kind of insight that might arise as the result of specialised philosophical, contemplative or spiritual practice. *Episteme* was the kind of empirical scientific knowledge given to those who made a detailed study of the way things worked. And *phronesis* was the quality possessed by ‘statesmen and law-makers’, that ‘locates the prudent course of action and resists the urging of the passions and the deceptions of the senses.’ (Robinson 1990).

¹ I am grateful to Jonathan Rowson for his substantial and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

The sense that I want to explore is closest to the latter, though I shall stretch the notion of *phronesis* to include even more localised and situated forms of wise action. I suspect that we are far better off talking, in a less grandiose fashion, about examples of 'acting wisely', where 'wisdom' is an adverbial quality that applies to specific actions in specific situations. As with other abstract nouns such as 'creativity' or 'intelligence', the common compulsion to reify these adverbial qualities, turning them into hypothetical entities, sends people off on all kinds of unprofitable wild-goose-chases – not least because this reification seems to suggest that the elusive quality under discussion is both separable from other cognate notions, and homogeneous, rather than being an umbrella term that conceals a host of more specific attributes and abilities that may well overlap extensively with other concepts. It may be more profitable to look at the ways in which 'wisdom' and 'creativity' (for example) are both similar and distinct, than to try to treat each *sui generis*.

I also think it is productive to leave open the question of the extent to which wise action or wise judgment has to draw upon deliberate, systematic, conscious and even intellectual forms of thought. In the stories I cite below, it is moot as to how much conscious cogitation preceded the wise action, and indeed there are many examples of acting wisely where the luxury of deliberation is precluded, for example by the urgency of the situation. Wise action may manifest in a highly intuitive and spontaneous way, just as much as – or perhaps even more than – it requires explicit rationality. Wise action, at least as I use the term, often has a light and contingent quality that ponderous rationality – the methodical weighing up of pros and cons, and so on – often lacks.

As my selection of the stories makes clear, I think wisdom manifests prototypically in the context of complicated human affairs. As a rule *acting wisely means interacting with other people, and with their predicaments, in such a way that multiple desiderata, often in the form of apparent conflicts and impasses, are satisfied, often in innovative and surprising ways*. The timing of such interventions may well be at least as important as their nature. I suspect that acting wisely is underpinned more by an intuitive moral clarity than by analytical precision. The miscarriages of justice that are the regular outcomes of lengthy, clever, analytical argumentation are testament enough to the loose relationship between reason and wisdom. Politicians regularly make decisions that seem very far from wise.

I suggest that we use 'wise' as an adjective to describe particular *people* only in the sense that they have, arguably, over time, acted wisely more frequently or more reliably than most of their fellows. Calling someone 'wise' is, at most, a prediction, based on such observations or testimony, that, faced with a morally or psychologically complicated situation in the future, their response stands a higher-than-average chance of being wise. Such a definition of 'wise persons' does not, of course, say anything about their age, gender or experience. The archetypal icons of wisdom, in Western society at least, tend to be male, bearded and old - Gandalf, Obi-wan Kenobi, God - though we must remember that wisdom sometimes also arrives 'out of the mouths of babes and sucklings'. However, whether there is indeed a correlation between the frequency of wise action and such characteristics is ultimately an empirical question.

I think that 'acting wisely' can only be understood in the light of a detailed appreciation of the full circumstances in which the act occurred, including both the explicit and the unstated hopes, fears and expectations of all participants.² If the actors do not have such an appreciation, their acts are very unlikely to be 'wise', and if the observers do not have such an appreciation, their judgments as to whether the

² In a chapter called 'Koreans do not believe in evil' in *Dividing Reality* by Eli Hirsch (1993), a Korean student, asked to comment on a seemingly immoral act within a family, replies: 'Tell me the nature of the relationship, and I will tell you what is evil.'

act was wise or not are unlikely to be reliable. However – and here there is inevitable ground for disagreement - the attribution of wisdom to an action or a judgment reflects the values and perspectives of the attributor, and thus I doubt, as I said above, that there will ever be a consensus about any particular putative example. In my experience people tend to agree that the stories in the boxes describe plausible instances of wise action – but the judgment is by no means universal. It is always possible to attribute egocentric or even Machiavellian motives to the actors in such exemplary tales, and such attributions cannot ultimately be disputed. (So I invite you, at least for the purposes of discussion, to give these stories and their protagonists the benefit of the doubt, but cannot insist that you do so.)

The value of studying wisdom

I suggest it is helpful to bear in mind that the intellectual investigation of ‘wisdom’, whether empirical or conceptual, bears only the most tangential relationship to the cultivation of the ability to act wisely. The key educational questions are: what conditions *enable* or *encourage* people to act more wisely; and what conditions, over time, *expand* people’s capacity and disposition to act wisely (regardless of whether the momentary conditions are conducive or not)? From this practical, educational point of view, conceptual discussions about the nature of ‘wisdom’ are necessary only in so far as they facilitate exploration of the key questions. Some rough distinctions and working definitions may be needed to get you going; endless disputation about what is or is not a canonical case of wisdom is not, in itself, wise.

I find it salutary to bear in mind that ‘studying wisdom’ courts the same kind of absurdity as studying ‘humour’ or ‘sexuality’. Such study is an activity of interest to an intellectual minority that the vast majority of people find simply beside the point. For them, the proof of the pudding of humour, sexuality or wisdom is in the eating of the momentary, lived experience. Jokes are funny when they are constructed and timed in such a way that they induce an abrupt, experiential shift of perception, accompanied by an explosion of bodily energy. Wise actions often have the same kind of immediacy and impact. Learned, articulate, scholarly people are no more conspicuously wise than anybody else, and there are those who would argue that – Socrates notwithstanding - they are likely to be less so.

It would, of course, be very easy to construct a syllabus that explored the ‘concept of wisdom’. There would be modules on the history of the idea, on the etymology of the word; on philosophical problems in the definition; on anthropological studies of the differing views of ‘wisdom’ in different cultures; on famous candidates for the title of ‘wise persons’; and so on. But none of this need have any impact on the cultivation of the ability to act wisely in any of its students. It is an entirely empirical matter as to whether any such study, and which, if any, topics, taught through what sort of pedagogy, have any effect on the growth of wise ability, rather than on mere knowledgeability.

Story 1: The Unwise Hero

Back in the 1970s, American aikido student Terry Dobson was in Tokyo, putting in eight hours intensive training a day. He was skilled and he was tough, but he hadn’t yet grasped the central idea that aikido was, as his teacher put it, about resolving conflict, not starting it. One ordinary afternoon, on his way to training, the peace of the subway train was shattered by the arrival of a large, dirty, drunk Japanese labourer, swearing and lashing out at whoever got in his way – some old folks and a young mother and baby. Dobson thought his moment had come, so he stood up, prepared to test his skill in real combat – with an impeccable moral rationale. ‘If I don’t do something, people are going to get hurt’, he said to himself.

Just as the drunk was gathering himself to rush Dobson, someone yelled 'Hey!', and they both stopped in their tracks and looked down in surprise at a little old Japanese man sitting between them. Completely ignoring the American, he beamed up at the labourer and asked him what he had been drinking. 'Sake', said the man, 'and it's none of your goddamn business'. Dobson hovered, ready to drop him if things got ugly.

'Oh that's wonderful,' said the old man. 'I love sake too. Every night me and my wife – she's 76 you know – we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it out into the garden. We sit on our old bench and watch the sun go down, and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing. My great-grandfather planted that tree, and we worry about whether it will recover from those ice storms we had a while back...'

As the old man prattled on, the drunk's face began to relax and his fists to unclench. 'Yeah,' he said softly. 'I love persimmons too.' 'And I'm sure you have a lovely wife too', said the old man. 'No,' replied the labourer. 'My wife died.' He hung his head and began to sob. 'I haven't got a wife. I haven't got a job. I've lost my home. You've no idea how ashamed I feel.' A spasm of despair rippled through his body. 'My, my,' said the old man gently. 'That does sound terrible. Come over here and tell me about it.'

Dobson hung his head in shame too. As he puts it, 'Standing there in my well-scrubbed youthful innocence, my make-this-world-safe-for-democracy righteousness, I suddenly felt dirtier than he was.' As he left the train at his stop, he looked back and saw the labourer sprawled on the seat, his head in the old man's lap. The old man was softly stroking the filthy, matted hair. A very chastened Dobson sat on a bench. 'What I had wanted to do with muscle had been accomplished with kind words. I had just seen aikido in action, and the essence of it was love.'

Story 2: More Antagonism Reframed...

Eighty people are sitting in the big vestibule at Leiston Hall in Suffolk, home to Summerhill School. They are gathered for the weekly 'moot', the school's governing body. The youngest is four, and the oldest over 60. Everyone from the newest arrival to the founder of the school, A.S. Neill, has an equal voice, and a single vote. Decisions about almost every aspect of school life are made democratically in this forum.

On this occasion, a group of teenage girls are complaining that they are being harassed by a group of boys, who insist on flicking them with wet towels whenever they get the opportunity. The moot is discussing what punishment the boys deserve. Neil and his wife Eva both sit there patiently with their hands up, waiting to be called by the ten-year-old who is chairing the meeting. Eva's turn comes first. 'Just think how dull your lives would be if you *didn't* have these boys to harass you,' she says and everyone laughs. A little later it is Neill's turn. In his soft Scottish burr, he simply says, deadpan: 'I don't think the meeting has any right to interfere in a love affair.' Again everyone laughs. The girl who has been complaining most vociferously looks at the ring-leader of the boys and blushes. He looks away with a silly smile on his face. The meeting decides to give the boys a stiff warning, and business moves on.

Story 3: A Question of Wisdom

There's a nun who will never give you advice, but only a question. I was told her questions could be very helpful. I sought her out.

'I am a parish priest,' I said. 'I'm here on retreat. Could you give me a question?'

'Ah yes,' she answered. 'My question is, "What do they need?"'

To tell the truth, I came away disappointed. I spent a few hours with the question, writing out answers, but finally I went back to her.

'Excuse me,' I said. 'Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. Your question has been helpful, but I wasn't so much interested in thinking about my congregation during this retreat. Rather I wanted to think seriously about my *own* spiritual life. Could you give me a question that will help?'

'Ah, I see,' she said. 'Then my question for you is, "What do they *really* need?"'

When does acting wisely matter?

In the boxes are three cases that might enable us to reflect on what it is to act wisely, and on how easy or difficult it is to make that judgement in particular cases. I have also chosen them to suggest the kinds of situation where wisdom, at least of a particular kind, seems to me to be most relevant. We do not normally talk about making the tea or feeding the cat 'wisely', nor is the word commonly applied to practical problem-solving – fixing the plumbing – or to matters of aesthetic taste – redecorating the spare room. We do make wise or unwise investments, and wise or unwise career decisions; but what George Kelly (1955) called the 'focus of convenience' of the concept of wisdom seems to be complicated human, and particularly interpersonal, affairs. The old man on the Tokyo subway, the wily old nun and A.S. Neill, in their different ways, seem to me to be acting wisely in the face of situations of apparent conflict, confusion or entrenchment. Both the old man and Neill act in a way that takes the heat out of the situation, and the nun gently guides the priest towards a deeper appreciation of his own dilemma. All three also act in a way that subtly reframes the perception of the parties involved in a manner that seems to offer new opportunities for productive progress and/or resolution – possibilities that had not been apparent from within their previous held perspectives.

What is it to act wisely?

Can we also extract from these examples some tentative indications of what it is to act wisely? Let me offer for discussion some candidate features of wise action.

First, wise action seems to have an essentially *moral* quality that distinguishes it from other actions we might call 'cunning', 'smart', 'expedient' or merely 'intelligent'. Acting for short-term personal gain, especially if one's own long-term goals, or others' concerns and well-being, are neglected or jeopardised in the process, would not be called 'wise'. Wisdom takes account of the 'greater good', and of one's own higher, deeper or more lasting values. Terry Dobson describes the old man as operating on the basis of a kind of selfless 'love'. Indeed, in Buddhism, 'compassion' is seen as the inseparable companion of 'wisdom'.

Thus, secondly, acting wisely seems to require a degree of *disinterestedness* on the part of the actor which enables them to 'stand back from the fray', and to see the predicament more objectively, and in more of its all-round complexity.

Complementary perspectives that perhaps, on the face of it, seem irreconcilable, can

both be entertained, and in such a way that a more all-encompassing meta-perspective may emerge. Interestingly, A.S. Neill, passionate though he was about his students and his work, described himself as having a quality of 'benign indifference' in his dealings with young people. He cared deeply about them, but did not need anything from them, nor require them to be anything in particular, we might say. Of course people deceive themselves about their degree of disinterest all the time, and it is always possible to project a cynical view onto any such examples.

So wise actors appear not to muddy the situation by bringing much in the way of their own ego-based hopes, fears and expectations with them. Just as a counsellor or mediator is able to see a conflict more clearly than can the warring combatants, so the wise actor does not distort the situation by being partial, impatient, or eager to demonstrate their own effectiveness (or indeed 'wisdom'). The young American has something to prove, and his desire to be a hero, and to have a legitimate excuse to try out his aikido skills 'for real', lead him to inflame the situation, even as he tries to deal with it. The old man's freedom of manoeuvre is greater. He does not seem to be afraid of the drunk, so is not acting out of self-protection. He does not seem to be using the incident to prove anything to himself or others. And his unselfconsciousness allows him to babble on in an inconsequential way that looks, to begin with, quite irrelevant and self-indulgent, yet reveals itself to be a very astute and effective way of calming the angry labourer down, and opening up more productive ways to proceed. (Whether he was conscious of the need to teach the young American a lesson, as well as to enable the drunk to 'feel inward' rather than 'act out', we do not know. Perhaps the old man was a plain-clothes Zen master, a sort of spiritual 'Guardian Angel' protecting subway passengers as much from self-important foreigners as from indigenous hooligans.)

Implicit here, thirdly, is the ability of the wise actor not only to 'get out of the way', but also to empathise: to put themselves in other people's shoes and see the world as they see it, without becoming captured by the hurts or desires that, to those others, shine so blindingly bright. The old Japanese man is able to see through the labourer's anger to the distress below and, by skilfully indicating his recognition of it, allows it to surface. Neill was able to help his adolescent students to recognise themselves more clearly, and thus to move beyond the level of antagonism in which they had become temporarily stuck. It is said of Mahatma Gandhi that, when he was facing a difficult decision, he would look at it first through Hindu eyes, then from an Islamic perspective, and finally from the point of view of the British – and only when he had co-activated, as it were, all three complementary stances did he feel able to formulate what might possibly be a wise course of action.

In the somewhat more oblique story of the nun and the priest (and, as ever, giving the nun the benefit of the doubt), the nun's re-emphasising of her original question invites the stressed priest to challenge his assumption that his own well-being is being drained, rather than fed, by his ministry. Do, ultimately, his own real needs compete for attention with those of his flock – as he seems to have been assuming – or is it possible that his own deepest nurturance and fulfilment comes through the exercising of his compassion. One is reminded of Rabindranath Tagore's small poem: 'I slept and dreamed that life was joy. I woke, and found that life was service. I meditated, and behold! I found that service was joy.'³

³ Like all such stories, this one can be read on many levels. Jonathan Rowson reminded me that the force of 'really' could also be to draw the priest's attention to the universality of the deepest human needs – and thus to the possibility that, by answering the nun's question, he will also have answered his own. Indeed, part of the nun's wisdom lies in her appreciation that it may be easier to arrive at this realisation if we begin from others' concerns. If we start with ourselves, all kinds of more superficial, ego-related concerns can cloud our vision and obscure the enquiry.

Putative dispositions for wisdom

Such a line of thought leads to a kind of candidate short-list – I would put it no stronger than that at the moment – of personal traits or dispositions that, taken together, might provide the psychological platform from which wise actions can be launched. (I prefer to think of ‘dispositions’ rather than ‘skills’, because wise actions will not be produced spontaneously unless a person is *disposed* towards them: inclined to see appropriate occasions, and to act on them. To be wise, I think you have to be ready and willing, as well as able.)

What might some of these putative dispositions for wisdom be? It follows from the discussion above that one has to be *interested and engaged in human affairs*. At the same time, one has to be *disinterested* – ready, willing and able to see situations in way that is unclouded by one’s own motivational agendas. You could argue that one has to be more generally *perceptive*, disposed to take account of the unique constellation of patterns, considerations and details that are actually present, rather than to look through perceptual filters that neaten or distort things. And this in turn may well require the capacity to *tolerate things that do not ‘fit’* with normal expectations – ambiguities, contradictions and apparently irresolvable uncertainties. Keats called this disposition ‘negative capability’: ‘the ability to remain in doubts, mysteries and uncertainties without any irritable reaching after fact or reason’.

Part of the complexity with which the wise person typically has to deal is the fact that different protagonists hold different value systems and different points of view, so wisdom would seem to require a capacity for *empathy*: being able to put oneself in the shoes of several others simultaneously – and yet to ‘bracket out’, for the time being, as much as possible, one’s own values and perspectives. Allied to this might be the ability to *take time* – when there is time – and to patiently allow situations to reveal themselves in all their complexity, before attempting to formulate action. Yet at the same time, one needs to be able to *act decisively* when the moment is judged to be right – and often being willing, therefore, to act on the basis of intuition, before a defensive portfolio of explicit justifications has been prepared. The fact that wise interventions are often simultaneously subtle, surprising and incisive suggests the wise actor might need to be *open to and trusting of such intuitive promptings*.

To act wisely might well take a degree of *courage*: daring to intervene in situations that are emotionally fraught or downright dangerous, rather than hanging back or merely theorising or pontificating from a position of personal safety; and to do so in ways that others might find strange. This might, in turn, require a degree of *indifference to ‘public opinion’* – reflecting a *secure sense of self*, perhaps – and a commitment to doing what ‘feels right’ rather than what ‘looks good’.

As I say, such a list of ‘proto-sagacious dispositions’ – traits that incline a person towards wise action – has a degree of face validity, in terms of the approach to wisdom that I have adopted, but no more than that. It would require an extensive research project to establish the empirical robustness of such suggestions. Such a characterological approach to wisdom may well bear fruit in the future.

Wisdom: advanced creativity?

It is no coincidence that many of the traits that may well be associated with wisdom have also been connected with creativity. Tolerance for complexity and uncertainty, perspective taking, assumption-questioning, negative capability, independence of mind and courage have all been proposed as characteristics of the ‘creative mind’ (see Sternberg 1999).

But while wise actions are often creative, creativity is not always wise. We might note that wisdom and creativity differ in two important respects: morality and humanity. As I am using the term, wisdom has a necessarily moral quality. It functions for the greater good, rather than for the personal advantage or ego-satisfaction of the wise

actor. Creativity, on the other hand, is associated with the production of something novel and valued, or the innovative solution of a tricky problem, regardless of the moral dimension of the problem, or the ego-motivation of the creator. Designing new weapons of mass destruction, or ingenious forms of torture, could very well be called 'creative', within the normal meaning of the word; but no-one would call them wise, I think. Creativity is judged primarily by pragmatic, aesthetic or cognitive standards, not by moral ones. And likewise, creativity is not especially associated with the resolution of complex human or emotional predicaments. It might as well concern the design of a new gizmo or a film-script. Wisdom, I think, has a central concern with the skilful conduct of human affairs, and the resolution of complex human predicaments. SO the cognitive aspect of wisdom is, I would argue, very similar to the cognitive aspect of creativity. But wisdom has moral, motivation and social aspects with which creativity does not necessarily concern itself.

Neurosophy: Is the Brain Naturally Wise and Compassionate?

'The nub of Perowne's dilemma is this: no single course of action, including taking no action, is without ramifying consequence, potential casualty, or guilt'
James Urquhart on Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*

In a nutshell, this kind of wise action seems to emerge in the absence of an all-too-familiar backdrop of complex, anxious self-regard and self-concern. In its place comes a kind of clear, uninhibited moral clarity, that leads to action which is often surprising or creative, and which achieves a degree of reconciliation, insight, and a lightening of mood, in others as well, perhaps, as in oneself. It would be absurd to try to offer a neural account of wise action; theoretical fools rush in where angels wisely fear to tread. But a brief Just So Story might serve to illustrate the lines along which a more sophisticated train of neural thought might eventually run.

Human beings are social animals, and like all such, their portfolio of survival strategies comprises both 'selfish' and 'altruistic' actions. For such animals, recurrent conflicts are bound to occur. Do I attend to my own blood-sugar levels by taking the last banana, or do I service the 'web of social reciprocity', as Bruner called it, by offering the banana to the alpha male, or to the female with whom I hope to mate? Both are potentially 'intelligent' in terms of my own well-being – but I cannot do both. I have to choose – and if I am to choose 'wisely', my brain has to make the most accurate calculation it can of all possible costs and benefits, both short and long-term. And the parameters of this computation are personal and contingent. There is no rule-book for wise action. The wise decision about the banana may be very different for a healthy newcomer to a social group from that of a well-esteemed but diabetic old-timer.

One of the primary functions of a brain is to seek optimal resolution of such motivational conflicts and complexities. 'What to do for the best?' is its perpetual problem, and the subjectively optimal solution is always relative to the momentary configuration of active concerns, both sociable and selfish: physical needs, desires and values, on-going goals and interests, perceived threats and risks. The more complex this motivational 'force field', the harder to discover a course of action that satisfies every possible concern. Integrating all desires into a single motivational 'vector' that points the way to optimal action may even, on occasion, turn out to be impossible – in which case action may be suspended completely, paralysed in a paroxysm of 'self-consciousness' (as in the case of McEwan's protagonist, neurosurgeon Henry Perowne). Such paralysis is usually, or course, a dysfunctional response. Animals seem only to freeze when faced with an overwhelming threat. A politician may do so when asked a tricky question from which they can see no safe

way out (though usually they have trained themselves to cover the panic quickly with a veneer of anodyne blather.⁴

One method which the brain has, to simplify the motivational force-field to the point where it becomes tractable, is to 'subtract' some of the most inconvenient motives from the mix; and it can do that by muting or inhibiting them. Indecision can be resolved, in other words, by effectively denying the genuine motivational complexity of the situation. For example, in the classic 'good Samaritan' experiment, in which participants find themselves near a person in apparent distress, people tend to resolve any motivational discomfort – 'I'd like to help but it would make me late for the meeting' – by denying or downgrading their natural concern for a distressed human being. 'One of these other people will be sure to help', or 'She's probably just drunk, or acting the fool', they say to themselves. Through denial or rationalisation of this kind, the awkward concern is removed from the functional motivational tangle that the brain is trying to resolve.

But while this manoeuvre may ease the momentary problem of 'what to do next', such suppression seems only to disconnect, rather than deactivate, the awkward concern, and it therefore goes unrequited. A small, unattended deposit of guilt may accrue, and be carried forward, consciously or unconsciously, into the next computation. Unwise action, on this simple picture, reflects an intuitive misjudgement of one's true long-term interests through over- or under-estimating the motivational value of some subset of concerns. We may care for others too much, to the detriment of our own health. We may act selfishly, and fail to recognise the long-term damage this does to trust and goodwill. We may respond only to the most immediate concerns and neglect to activate those that are more long-term. We may lose sight of what truly matters to us most. In all these cases, acting unwisely is not the same as acting unintelligently. What matters when it comes to wisdom, I am suggesting, is not the astuteness of cognition *per se*, but the nature of the underlying motivational vector that is driving cognition.

Another way in which the motivational force-field can be simplified is if other people's motivational worlds are neglected. Without imagination or empathy, self-interest can be placed in the foreground, without being subverted or confused by taking into account other people's legitimate agendas, or the likely effect of our actions on them. There is a possible analogy here with the two complementary visual systems which neuroscientists now distinguish: the egocentric and the allocentric systems (Gray 2004). The egocentric system places the body at the centre of the world, and external objects are located at the ends of 'rays' of possible interaction that radiate from 'myself' as the origin. Allocentric space, on the other hand, 'utilises a map in which the relationships between locations of objects can be specified independently of the location of the observing subject, who himself (sic) has a location on the same map' (Gray p97). If we replace these literal representations of physical space with the idea of 'motivational spaces', then egocentric space places myself and my concerns squarely at the middle of all that goes on. Allocentric motivational space allows for a decentring, and a kind of relativism, in which other people's concerns have equal status, and my own personal portfolio of desires does not constitute the reference point against which all else is measured. Wise action, I am suggesting, can be seen as originating from such an allocentric viewpoint, in which a long-term appreciation of the 'good of all' supplants the perspective of narrow, egocentric self-interest.

⁴ For paralysis, followed by blather, see e.g. George W Bush when asked to describe what mistakes he thought he had made – or indeed his seven minutes of inaction on 9/11 when told, in front of a classful of children, of the first plane crash into the Twin Towers.

Can wisdom be cultivated?

Does this preliminary analysis of wisdom give us any handle on whether it may be cultivated, and if so, how?

First, we might observe that it throws some light on the question of whether wisdom is associated with ageing and the elderly. The empirical evidence is inconclusive, but my approach implies that there may at best be only a loose correlation between wisdom and age, mediated by the factors outlined above. The approach suggests some hypotheses that may be worthy of further investigation. For example: if empathy is a component disposition of wisdom, then age-related variations in empathy will affect the ability to act wisely. (It is alleged that old people can become less able to bear the cognitive load that is required to hold someone else's perspective in mind, and this would militate *against* a positive correlation between age and wisdom.)

On the other hand, it is also alleged that old people may lose many of the self-referenced motivations that once seemed so important, and thus clear the space for greater motivational clarity. And in addition, wise intuitions may only emerge from a rich, experiential database of complex, value-ridden situations, and of both personal and vicarious observations of more-or-less successful ways of resolving them. Such a database probably takes a good many years to accumulate. Further, wise options may only become apparent in these memories to someone who has developed the ability to inhabit an allocentric rather than an exclusively egocentric motivational frame of reference – and here again, time is on the side of the older person.

Which of these factors predominate, and how they interweave, are ultimately matters for empirical investigation. I think it is clear, however, that whether people tend to get wiser as they get older may well depend on the developmental trajectories of a range of other factors: especially the 'proto-sagacious dispositions' which I reviewed earlier. The question is: what factors influence whether people get more or less empathic, patient or capable of disinterest, for example, as they age. But can we now say anything new about how these trajectories can be influenced – hopefully for the good – through education? One implication could be that – as with 'creativity' – teachers are better advised to think of cultivating *component dispositions* and *precursors*, rather than grandly aiming at teaching the concept of 'wisdom' itself.

The *disposition towards empathy* could be one such candidate. Can it be cultivated? Some teachers think so. In a social studies lesson in a comprehensive school in Cardiff, the class of 11-year-olds are thinking about the causes of the Iraq War. They are wearing 'spectacles' cut out of blue cardboard. These are their 'empathy specs', which 'magically' enable them to look at events through different people's eyes. What do things look like to George Bush? To Tony Blair? To the sister of a soldier? To a widow in Falluja? To the Chief Executive of BP? Of course, no magical advantage is conferred by wearing the specs; all that happens is that empathy is being highlighted as a valuable ability, and, by turning it into an entertaining activity, the ability is being stretched, and the disposition strengthened. That at least is the intention – and the results of this one small pedagogical experiment suggest that it can be successful (see Claxton 1999, 2002).

Cultivating motivational clarity in young people would probably be a very much harder task. Adolescence is a time in which motivational portfolios are becoming, for most young people, significantly more complex and conflictual. The demands of school, family and friends continually collide, and a variety of motivational stances are being tried on for size. At one moment, a blank look or a facial blemish can matter terribly; at another, it can seem as if it is overridingly cool to care about nothing at all. Perhaps the most that teachers can hope to do is offer young people *models* of people who manifest a degree of motivational clarity. These could be the heroes and heroines of history, contemporary figures whose heroic (or otherwise)

actions are up for discussion, and even, perhaps, teachers' own conduct. It may be that the casual sowing of such seeds is as much as can be done. But the idea that 'wisdom' is a hybrid quality that emerges from the deployment of a range of less exotic – and therefore perhaps more teachable – dispositions, might give some clues as to how to cultivate it more effectively.

It could be that the ability to adopt a kind, wise and disinterested perspective itself grows out of the development of empathy. As one masters the ability to look at the world through the eyes of an increasing range of others, so it seems to become possible to partial out the particulars of individual's motivational perspectives, and approximate more and more closely to 'the view from 'nowhere'. One is able to adopt the perspective of 'the other' – but of no particular other. And from that position of relative objectivity, one can learn to be able to look back at oneself, and see one's own motivational perspective, as it were, from the outside. This is the 'knack' that is cultivated, allegedly, by the Buddhist meditative practice of 'mindfulness' (see Claxton 2006), or by the practice of 'bracketing' advocated by phenomenologists such as Husserl (see Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1992).

Conclusion

There are many approaches that can be taken to the investigation of the relationship between wisdom and creativity. In this chapter, I have mapped out an approach that relies on the identification of the putative array of personal dispositions that might underpin both wisdom and creativity. I have argued that such an approach reveals a good deal of overlap between these dispositional sets, but that there are two areas that distinguish wisdom from creativity. The first is wisdom's close concern with the domain of complex, and seemingly intractable, human affairs. And the second is the necessity, for an act to be wise, for the actor to be able to achieve a degree of 'motivational clarity' in which their own ego needs and perspectives are temporarily subordinated to a broader, more 'value-fair' form of perception. From the position of such a 'fair witness' the actor is able to see their own set of beliefs and motives as one amongst several sets, all with an equivalent validity, rather than, as is more normally the case, imbuing (and therefore skewing) their own perception with largely unacknowledged sets of their own biases, beliefs and preferences.

It seems as if some of dispositions that go to make up a mind that is 'sagacity-prone' are potentially capable of being deliberately nurtured in the context of education. The development of others, however – such as the capacity for the kind of objectivity just described – may well be tasks that are only possible, or more appropriate, later in the life span.

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