

## Practical Wisdom

Barry Schwartz

Phone: 267-978-4661

Email: [bschwar1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:bschwar1@swarthmore.edu)

The subject of this course is Practical Wisdom. Throughout the course, we will be investigating five questions:

1. What is practical wisdom?
2. When and why do we need practical wisdom?
3. When and how do we acquire practical wisdom?
4. What institutional forces threaten practical wisdom?
5. What institutional arrangements encourage and nurture practical wisdom?

We will investigate these questions in several important domains of life—friendship, education, work, medicine, law, and family. We will also investigate these questions more theoretically, in the hope of developing a solid understanding of what makes wisdom or judgment a crucial component of our lives. Throughout the course, we will be contrasting decision-making that depends on practical wisdom, or judgment, with decision making that depends on following various kinds of rules or responding to external rewards and punishments. We are often told, or tell ourselves, that though we may not be as analytically sharp as we were when we were younger, we are much wiser than we were before. What does this mean? Is it true? Are there particular areas in our lives where wisdom is especially important?

*I am hoping that you will come to each class having reflected on the questions listed in the syllabus, in addition to your own personal experience living your lives. I hope you will come to class prepared to engage in at least some discussion.*

### Recommended Reading

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. This classic is where the concept of practical wisdom is introduced and explained. There is also a substantial discussion of the different types of friendship, which we will be discussing in Class 1. I warn you: Aristotle is no picnic to read.

Gawande, A. *The Checklist Manifesto*. Atul Gawande writes brilliantly about medicine. In this book, he argues that at least some aspects of medical practice should be governed by rules. Our question is, which ones?

Gawande, A. *Being Mortal*. Another Gawande masterpiece that looks at a very different side of medical practice.

Haidt, J. *The Righteous Mind*. This illuminating book presents the author's theory of where our moral judgments come from.

Nussbaum, M.C. (1995). *Poetic Justice*. Boston: Beacon Press. This short, but challenging book is an argument for the need for judgment, not calculation, in pursuit of justice.

Kronman, A. *The Lost Lawyer*. The very distinguished law professor and dean writes about what it takes to be a good lawyer, and the challenges to practicing well that the legal profession imposes on its practitioners.

MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue*. Another challenging book by a philosopher that argues for our need for a morality based on virtuous character rather than any set of rules. It attempts to bring Aristotle into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Schwartz, B. *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life*. In this book, I attempt to show how incentive-based systems and institutions can corrupt the practices that they are meant to regulate and improve.

Schwartz, B. *The Paradox of Choice*. This is, in effect, an argument for what Aristotle called the “mean” (meaning the right amount, not the average) when it comes to extending freedom of choice to individuals.

Schwartz, B. & Sharpe, K. *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*. This book is an extended exposition of most of the material in the course.

Starr, P. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*. This brilliant book by a sociologist is an account of how medicine came to look the way it does.

### Class 1: Practical Wisdom: Introduction

This session will provide the lay of the land for what is to come. We will discuss what practical wisdom is, why we need it, and the alternatives to it that society increasingly relies on. We will explore the nature of friendship as our introduction to practical wisdom. What does it take to be a good friend? Think about interactions you have had over the years with a very close friend, or with a life partner. What do you think is the essence of your relationship? What has strained your friendships over the years? Do you want something different from friends now than you did when you were younger? Think about the kinds of characteristics you look for in a close friend and why these characteristics are important. What do you think you have to teach your kids and grandkids about friendship? And we will discuss what might be called “intellectual virtues” and explore how the loss of intellectual virtue can help explain the political morass in which we are all currently living.

### Issues to Think About

1. Everyday life among friends is sometimes about making big choices about how to solve difficult problems you each face. But there are a myriad of small, everyday choices you also must make. Some examples include: How much time to spend with which friend, how to divide time between work and a friend, how to figure out when to trust your friend’s inclinations and when to challenge them, how honest to be with a friend and how to balance kindness with honesty. How do you make these kinds of decisions?

2. Good listening is important to be a friend. Most of us think that good listening is easy: just sit down, be quiet, and listen. But good listening takes a lot more than this. Why is it so difficult? What kinds of “balances” or “judgments” need to be made to listen well? What kind of person do we need to be—what kinds of virtues do we need to have—to *do* such balancing and make such judgments?

3. “It is essential for friends to be honest.” “It is essential for friends to be kind.” “It is essential for friends to be empathetic” “It is essential for friends to be...” What do you think of these claims? What *is* essential for friendship?

4. Aristotle distinguished between character friendships, utility friendships, and pleasure friendships? How are they different, and what is “true” friendship?

5. What is the difference, if any, between romantic love and these kinds of friendships?

6. Aristotle writes: “virtue makes us aim at the right target, and practical wisdom makes us use the right means.” What do you think he means? Others have argued that aiming at the right target is often difficult for two reasons: (1) it is not clear what honesty or caring or loyalty or courage would be in a given context, and (2) there are often different virtues at play and they need to be balanced (the honest thing to do is often not the kind thing to do; the courageous thing to do is often not the generous or fair or humble thing to do). Why is wisdom, rather than rules, needed to overcome this difficulty?

7. For whom should we show care and compassion? The Christian doctrine of “agape” suggests that we owe care and compassion to all equally. What, if anything, is wrong with this view? An alternative view is that we owe care and compassion to those to whom we are related in some way. What, if anything, is wrong with this view? If each of these views is problematic, what are we supposed to do? How do you draw the line between circles of care and compassion based on your relations to other people?

8. Wisdom, I suggest, requires “moral skill” and “moral will.” What are these, and why are skill and will moral?

9. There is nothing that better epitomizes rationality in the modern world than science and scientific progress. Yet the distinguished philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, argues that if one studies the history of science, one can find no rules, or “algorithms” that tell us how to choose one scientific theory over another. So, the “rationality of science,” according to Kuhn, is not a rationality of rules. He says it is a rationality of “epistemic values,” and reasonable, well-informed people can differ about the importance of different epistemic values and about how well any given theory satisfies them. Can we view Kuhn’s account of choice among scientific theories as just a special case of good choices in general?

## Class 2. Practical Wisdom: Psychology of Wisdom

In this class, we will discuss the psychological components of practical wisdom. We will discuss what it means to be rational, to be perceptive, to be able to take the perspective of others, and to be empathetic. We will discuss the nature of everyday, as opposed to scientific or logical concepts, to illustrate how even in organizing our worlds, judgment is required. We will discuss what empathy requires, and how it is developed. We will discuss how modern understanding of how our brains and nervous systems are organized suggests that we are “wired for wisdom.” We will contrast using rules or algorithms to make decisions with using judgment. Increasingly, we are living in a world that is governed by rules or algorithms. There is something good about this orientation, but there is also something that this orientation misses. We will discuss both what rules accomplish and what they miss. We will also discuss the distinction that psychologists currently make between “automatic” and “reflective” thinking processes and ask which of these, if either, practical wisdom exemplifies. And we will discuss the importance of finding the “mean” as we try to be virtuous in our interactions with other people.

### Issues to Think About

1. Why is context so important when it comes to making decisions? Why do general rules or standard procedures fail? Why is it so important to be “perceptive” and what kind of perception is needed?

2. When you have to make a moral judgment it is common for someone to say: “forget your feelings, be objective” or “don’t let your feelings interfere with your judgment” or “be rational. Don’t be emotional.” Do you think this is good advice, or do you think that emotion adds something critical to cool, dispassionate reason?

3. To make moral decisions that involve tradeoffs in the modern world, we often rely on utilitarianism, a moral standard that tries to figure out what action will lead to the greatest good for the greatest number. How do you make decisions that may end up making some people affected by the decisions worse off?

4. Some have suggested that good stories are important for good decision making—that we rely on narrative more than on logic. Why? Can you think of examples from your own experiences? If we learn what to do from stories, how is that different from learning what to do from “rules” or from learning certain decision-making procedures? Isn’t it better to rely on consistent rules and procedures than to trust in stories?

5. Why do most practical choices we make demand determining some “mean” or “balance” between good objectives and intentions—and what role does wisdom play in finding that balance?

### Class 3. Practical Wisdom in Law and Medicine

This class will examine the legal and medical professions and explore the role of wisdom and judgment in the practice of law, in the practice of judging, and in the practice of medicine. We will explore the role of wisdom and judgment in writing contracts, mediating negotiations, resolving family disputes, conducting fair trials, and administering fair sentences. I hope that some of you who have had experience in the legal profession will bring that experience to bear in our discussion.

We will also examine the practice of medicine in modern America, with an eye toward figuring out when and why wisdom is needed, how it is nurtured, and what the obstacles are to becoming and then being a wise physician. I hope those of you with experience as providers in the world of medicine will bring that experience to bear in our discussion. And of course, we all have experience as recipients of medical services. What do you think is missing from medicine as it is currently practiced?

### Issues to Think About

1. Judges and lawyers talk about legal reasoning as if it demanded only rigorous, logical deduction from determinate rules or general principles. But some argue that there is another kind of reasoning that is crucial in law, “analogical reasoning” (eg., an X is like a Y). How is this different from the dominant model of legal reasoning—and why is it essential for judges who want to both follow the law and make good decisions? Also try to think about the importance of analogical reasoning in your own every day moral decision making.

2. Given the negative reputation of lawyers, the practice of law may be the last place most Americans would look for examples of the importance of good character and practical wisdom. But Kronman, in *The Lost Lawyer* argues that one cannot be a good lawyer without them. What do you think?

3. Few law students think that they will have trouble practicing law ethically, but they are wrong. Why? What are the forces and factors that threaten virtue and practical wisdom in law? Could you avoid these problems by working in a setting other than that of a large law firm or working at a different kind of law, like family law?

4. We can distinguish between three kinds of work that lawyers do: they act as judges, as advocates, and as counselors. What are the important differences between these three kinds of work?

5. Does the very role of the lawyer-as-advocate endanger the character and practical wisdom of the lawyer? Is it naive for us even to ask about the “moral decisions” such lawyers make in their everyday work? Or are there factors—professional regulations, the specific organization of work, the character education of these lawyers, community norms—that have important effects on moral reasoning of such advocates?

6. Why can't a physician be a good doctor without practical wisdom?

7. Many people are concerned about changes in the nature of medical practice and how these changes affect the ethical judgment that is integral to good clinical judgment. Among the factors they look at are these: the commodification of health care, the cost containment and the financial incentives given to physicians to act as cost-control agents for third parties, excessive bureaucratization and regulation. Do these changes teach habits or routines that undermine practical wisdom and the virtues of good character? Most people agree that the old system of medical practice had its own problems and was far from ideal. Modern medicine is certainly a technical improvement on the past. Is it also a moral improvement on the past?

8. Have you had experiences in the world of medicine, either as patient or as provider, that are good examples of either wise or unwise practice? Please bring them with you to class for discussion.

9. Like other social practices, medical practitioners need practical wisdom to be good at their practice. What are some of the instances that demand this practical wisdom in medicine? Why would one fail to be a good doctor without it?

10. Much medical practice has been “commodified,” so that we shop for and buy medical services the way we shop for and buy clothing, appliances, and furniture. The ethical question commodification raises is whether the marketplace is the proper instrument for the distribution of health care. Specifically, is health care sufficiently different from pantyhose, ocean-front condominiums, or television sets to set it apart from other consumer goods? In what ways is it different?

11. Some critics of modern medicine have argued that paying physicians to act as cost-control agents for third parties pits the interests of physicians against those of patients. It motivates physicians to consider their own financial interests in balancing the concerns of the payers and patients. And it compromises the ability of physicians to offer patients disinterested professional advice. What are some of the effects of these financial incentives on patient care and on the character, and practical wisdom, of nurses and doctors?

#### Class 4. Practical Wisdom in Education and Other Types of Work

This class will focus on the role of practical wisdom, in teaching—on the importance of realizing that each student is different and has different needs, abilities,

and interests. How do teachers learn to provide for the unique needs of every student? And how does concern about favoritism and bias challenge the effort to treat different students differently. We will explore these issues all the way from elementary school to university education, examining both the opportunities and the obstacles to being a wise teacher. I should point out that we are all “teachers,” even if we don’t set foot in classrooms. We are teaching our children and grandchildren with every decision we make, every action we take.

We will also examine the need for practical wisdom in police, the military, in hairdressing, in selling retail, and even in being a hospital janitor. The point of these examples is to show that you don’t have to be a highly educated professional to need and to use wisdom. Indeed, a case can be made that in any activity that involves other people, practical wisdom is essential.

### Issues to Think About

1. Most teachers must make small moral choices dozens of times in every class if they are to teach well. Whether or not you have taught—in schools or in the workplace—see if you can answer these two questions: (1) why is making moral choices well essential to good teaching? (2) Why is practical wisdom important in making the kinds of decisions teachers make every day??

2. Can educational reforms undermine the practical wisdom of teachers? Do teacher accountability and performance “standards” demand standardization of teaching?

3. In the complex world of the classroom, competing goals and multiple tasks are negotiated at a breakneck pace, trade-offs are continually made, unanticipated obstacles and opportunities arise. One researcher estimated that a classroom teacher has about 200 unpredictable “personal interactions” an hour. Many of these involve some kind of *moral* choice. How are we supposed to make these choices?

4. One argument for standardized curriculum and standardized tests is an argument for equality: it insures that all students in a state, rich or poor, will get the same education. Is it still the case that such education is “unfair” because “unequal,” and therefore, in the name of equity, standardization should be supported? Is it possible that standardization exacerbates inequality? Think about the recent Supreme Court decision on affirmative action in light of this issue. Leaving aside the legal fine points, did the Court make the right moral decision?

5. “Without character, a teacher is more ill equipped than if he or she had not mastered particle physics, Shakespeare's tragedies, or harmony and counterpoint.” Why? Is the same true for students? Answer this question by looking concretely at good and bad educational experiences you (or your kids and grandkids) have had.

6. The everyday moral choices involved in good teaching may demand that college teachers develop and exercise practical wisdom and other virtues. But there are

obstacles to this posed by structural constraints: pressures to do research, the kind of market competition that has developed among schools to fill empty chairs or get the best students, the demands that students (conceived of as “consumers”) exert on teaching, and pressures on teachers to use grades to motivate students or to “credential” them after graduation. Think about these constraints and explain how they challenge or undermine practical wisdom or some other important virtue of teaching.

7. What is a “wise” hairdresser?
8. What does a “wise” janitor look like?
9. Why is wisdom important in those who defend and/or protect us—the police and the military?
10. What does a wise salesperson look like, in contrast to an unwise one?
11. Can you think of why and how wisdom might be needed even on the factory floor?

#### Class 5. “War on Wisdom

In this class, we will examine how efforts to make our key social institutions run better are actually making them worse. We will see how institutional failures lead to more, and more rigid rules, which undermine the development and deployment of moral skill. And we will see how increasing reliance on incentives undermine moral will. The sorts of tools we have come to rely on to fix broken institutions may make things better in the short run, but at the same time, they make things worse in the long run. We will also discuss Aristotle’s notion of a *telos*, an appropriate goal of a given activity, and how the existence of a *telos* as a moral guide helps to keep our professional practices on track.

At this point in our course, I hope I will have convinced you of the importance of practical wisdom to being a good friend, a good romantic partner, a good parent, a good teacher, a good lawyer, and a good doctor, a good hairdresser, and even a good janitor. In this class, we will focus on modern threats to practical wisdom, which come in two general categories. First, excessive reliance on rules, standard operating procedures, and bureaucratic structures prevents people from developing and deploying the *skill* of wise judgment. Second, excessive reliance on incentives undermines people having the *will* to exercise practical judgment. Wisdom demands the moral skill and moral will to do the right thing, and our standard tool kit undermines both. We will examine this process in the various settings that we have already discussed and consider what we might seek to do going forward to allow wise practices to return to our social and professional lives. We should be thinking about what we might do, concretely, to strengthen opportunities to be wise and also, what we might do to nurture wisdom in our children and grandchildren.

#### Class 6. Practical Wisdom and Other Approaches to Moral Judgment and Action

We will conclude the course with a discussion that contrasts practical wisdom, and more generally, what is often called “virtue ethics,” with other approaches to moral decision making. We will examine the reliance on strict moral rules (as in many religious doctrines and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and John Rawls. We will examine the more context dependent approach of philosopher Michael Walzer. We will examine the guidelines offered by Utilitarianism. And we will examine what psychology has to tell us about moral thinking, reviewing the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, and Jonathan Haidt. We will explore whether virtue ethics is even possible in a pluralistic society in which people often disagree about what counts as virtue.

### Issues to Think About

1. Think about a moral dilemma you have faced in your life—even a small one. How did you resolve it? How should you have resolved it? Were you wise in coming to a decision about what to do?
2. Some argue that American society is just too diverse and pluralistic for us to rely on wise judgment to provide moral guidance and resolve moral disputes. On the other hand, others argue that diversity and pluralism are what enable us to get out from under our own particular moral blinders and see the problem we face as others might see it. What do you think? Is ethical diversity a blessing or a curse...or both?
3. Can you think of steps we might take to “remoralize” the professions we depend on?
4. “Why is it that we worry that the butcher might put a finger on the scale, but not the postal clerk?” I read this question posed in a book about the petty larcenies of everyday life years ago. How would you answer it? And what would you do to make the butcher more like the postal clerk?