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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO WISDOM?

Euan Hill

Philosophy, by no longer performing its original therapeutic function of helping people to become wise, choosing instead to offer analysis, has left us at risk of losing the techniques which had evolved to facilitate the task of teaching wisdom throughout its history. In the process of endeavouring to re-establish Philosophy as Therapy after the war, with the aim of helping people to think for themselves rather than just study the ideas of others, Wittgenstein and Wisdom rediscovered the need for many of these techniques, especially for a way of revealing to people their underlying and unconscious assumptions.

The pursuit of *wisdom* and the powerful human drive to achieve it that has led so many people over so many centuries to devote their lives to it, must surely be the ground which underlies every philosophical activity. Yet it seems to have become what the French call *l'Arlésienne*, the principal character in a narrative who never actually puts in an appearance.

Brenda Watson, however, in her masterly response in *Think* 36 to an article by Laurence Peddle, which had appeared in *Think* 33 on the Meaning and Mystery of Life, indirectly brings up what has probably been one of the main, if not the main, aspects of wisdom, at least in its teaching. The third section of Watson's response is devoted to the constraining effect of unacknowledged assumptions and the need to escape from this intellectual confinement – something she develops in detail in her important 2004 book: *Truth and Scripture, Challenging Underlying Assumptions*.

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The acquisition of wisdom seems always to have been seen largely as a matter of removing blocks to one's vision. In the Socratic dialogue *Alcibiades* (which may have been written by Plato), Socrates, by taking his friend step by step through his false assumptions, shows Alcibiades that in the end wisdom is about following the Delphic inscription and understanding himself. This means examining his soul. 'If a soul is to understand itself it must look at another soul', he says. It needs a mirror. The Prophet of Islam said that the wise were those who had prayed to be shown all things as they truly are and whose prayers had been answered. Wittgenstein spoke of meaning-blindness.

The idea of wisdom has probably become just too general and non-physical for our specialized and materialistic world. The preference for brevity over clarity, the use of tick-box thinking, the increased variety of specialist jargons, a penchant for oversimplified explanations, may all have something to do with it. People concentrate on things like the specific rules of a morality, the results of statistical calculations, or on things where the evidence is purely physical.

Sadly, whatever the reason for the loss of consideration for wisdom, we find ourselves ignoring and thereby wasting the considerable expertise which in different civilizations humanity has accumulated while seeking to help people to become wise and consequently to understand themselves. It's true that *psychoanalysis*, especially the variety calling itself *archetypal psychology*, has adopted some of the techniques which have evolved, but it seems to have settled into a conceptual world of *mental disease*. We tend to forget that philosophy was originally practised as a therapy. The idea of restricting it to being a tool for analysing the way things are, or for theorizing about the way they might be, is relatively recent. In this context the label *therapy* needs to be taken with something approaching its original Greek meaning, that is, with a sense of *caring* and *fostering* added to *treatment* and *cure*. You could call it *assisted adult development*.

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Nowadays the idea of *philosophy as therapy* is most often associated with the name of Wittgenstein. It's also frequently referred to in a disparaging tone as if Wittgenstein had been a disaster for philosophy. References to Wittgenstein by Chris Norris in *Think* 37, by Simon Glendinning in *Think* 32, and by Oliver Leech to both Wittgenstein and Wisdom in the same number, bring home to me the awareness that I could be one the few people still alive who knew both men and was privy to their oral teaching. This emboldens me to relate some of the important notions I received from them.

Like so many men of his generation who had suffered the first horrors of the new industrial warfare between 1914 and 1918, Wittgenstein found it hard to believe that humanity was allowing the same thing to happen again only twenty years later. As a result, by 1945, he, like many others, found his principal desire was to find a way of changing the outlook, the mindset, of people.

When, in 1948, after being demobbed, I was able to go up to Trinity College, Cambridge to read philosophy, Wittgenstein had just decided not to lecture any more and, aware that his health was failing, had got together with John Wisdom to pursue a project of trying to help students to think for themselves rather than teaching them philosophy in the more usual way of studying the opinions of different philosophers through the ages. To do so they concentrated on finding ways of leading students to become aware of their unconscious assumptions. This was seen as *curing them of philosophy* – or, perhaps more strictly, just curing them of traditional academic philosophical problems. It was not enough to point people's assumptions out to them; they had to come to see what they were for themselves. The skill required was to be able to show unconscious assumptions to individuals in such a way that they *felt* they had become aware of them themselves.

Basically, Wittgenstein and Wisdom saw the root of these unacknowledged assumptions as stemming largely from two hidden assumptions in particular. The first was the

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assumption that every *use* of language was the same – that a discussion about the existence of God used language in the same way as a discussion about the continued existence of yellow fever bearing mosquitoes in northern Brazil. Wittgenstein's famous theory of *language games* had been devised as an explanation, which, it was hoped, would help people understand how every discourse was different and was moulded by its context. The second was the assumption that *truth* was something absolute, universal, and unique, something knowable by everybody, rather than an emergent property of a context, not necessarily apparent to everyone.

I was privileged in that not only was Wisdom my tutor, but in my last year I had the good fortune to be granted rooms on the same staircase as his. This led to many pre-prandial mugs of sherry over which we were able to examine many of the ancillary implications of endeavouring to free people from the hold of their preconceptions. Several important features emerged and were clarified for me on these occasions. With the passage of time their necessary nature seems only to have become clearer. The following list is an attempt to bring them together:

1. The awareness of a previously unconscious preconception or assumption is a *felt experience*, that is, independent of any sensory input. There is a distinct experience of *understanding*. It can be powerful like the *Eureka* experience of Archimedes or dramatic like that of St Paul on the road to Damascus. Not being a matter of reason, the hidden assumption is unlikely to respond to any logical argument. Jean Piaget's work on the way the child's mind handles new experiences now offers a helpful model which could be applicable to adults in this regard, but it was not current at the time.

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2. An approach to people about a perceived hidden assumption of theirs needed to be personal, indirect, and on a one-to-one basis. Wisdom managed to do a lot with tutorials of three or four people, and Wittgenstein would still meet with a similar number, although by that time this was more of a monitoring exercise. It needed to be personal too in the sense that a special sympathy and empathy had to exist between the parties. Both Wittgenstein and Wisdom had an abundance of charisma so that it was not hard for a traditional and close master/disciple relationship to develop. Neither of them wanted to address anonymous people or write books for them. They felt that what they wanted to achieve would be impossible that way. We were asked not to read the *Tractatus*, which he regretted not being able to withdraw from circulation. Part of the reason Wittgenstein resigned, and for his frequent absences from Cambridge, was the pressure he felt he was under to write a book against his will. Wisdom felt under the same pressure, and I remember suggesting to him that he gather some of the articles he had published in *Mind* and cobble them together into a book to make the authorities happy.
3. The revelation of a hidden assumption, the *disappearance of the problem* as it was referred to, might still leave another one in its place, which would have to be uncovered later. The first one might, of course, turn out to be a covert expression of another more general and more deeply ingrained one. At the time Wittgenstein and Wisdom were limiting themselves to looking at the preconceptions that generated doubts and questions which

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were specifically what people would call philosophical. Nevertheless, they were both immensely interested in the profounder psychological and spiritual aspects of adult human development. Wittgenstein's favourite source book for examples for us was *The Brothers Karamazov* and Wisdom's was *Crime and Punishment*. Personally, I was always reminded of an image from my childhood, the image in *Peer Gynt* of man as an onion.

4. Privacy, discretion, or some form of restricted access, even secrecy at times, was another necessity. Interference by people outside the immediate circle of those who were *undergoing therapy*, people who either could not or would not understand what was going on, could prove a major distraction and a significant problem.
5. Associated with the notion of language games was something that Wisdom characterized with the saying: 'if you want to know what *electricity* is, ask a physicist; but if you want to know what *love* is, ask a poet'. This was a way of drawing attention to something that goes beyond the traditional distinction between what is physical and perceptible *sensibly*, i.e. with the five senses, and what is *intelligible*, i.e. qualitative and non-physical. It expresses the idea that in the non-physical world as well as in the physical, there is a distinction to be drawn between the artificial or man-made, and the natural or found. A concept like *electricity* is rationally *constructed* in order to *explain* and gather together a series of observations, whereas a concept like *compassion* or *jealousy* is felt as an experience, *perceived* as an expressed *meaning*. The expression of the quality itself

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may be made by action, speech, or other graphic or sonic methods. It is revealed and understood by grasping enough of the various aspects of the context of an event: the where, when, what, and who was present, of it. Most importantly the context includes the state of development, current mindset, and point of view of the observer. Often the point of view and mindset of others present may also form a significant part of the context.

6. What we are observing, and naming, is a natural universal quality. The precise boundaries for applying the name of a quality may vary between cultures, and individuals may differ in the degree to which they suffer from what Wittgenstein called meaning-blindness, but the potential awareness of the quality is universal. Of course, the full appreciation and understanding of a quality involves experiencing it both passively and actively. To really know what *jealousy* is, you need to have both felt what it is to be the object of someone's jealousy and to have been aware of being jealous of someone. It's the same with *compassion*. You need to have been conscious of being the object of someone's compassion as well of having acted compassionately in order to really feel you understand the meaning of *compassion*. The old Arab idea of the 99 names of God, and of the 100th, which only the camel knows, elegantly encapsulated this feature of language.
7. There is a further feature of the application of language that I always think of as the *Gödel point*. In effect it is an application to discourse in general of the insight manifest in the mathematics of *Gödel's incompleteness*

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theorem. Language – in whatever form it takes – carries meaning which varies according to the way it's delivered and interpreted within its contextual situation. Each of Wittgenstein's so-called *language games* forms a kind of independent system and if you try to describe a particular system in terms of that same system, i.e. from within the system, you must be prepared for your description to be either incomplete or inconsistent. You cannot, for example, say what *science* is scientifically, or legally say what *the law* is in general. It exposes the problem with the supposedly scientific concept of the *objective* viewpoint, which some people call *the view from nowhere*.

8. The context of an observation necessarily involves the viewpoint of the observer. This does not change if an attempt is made to repeat an observation with different observers. In most ordinary everyday circumstances neither *incompleteness* nor *inconsistency* is a problem. If either *completeness* or *consistency* is needed, we can still use the non-physical world to talk about the physical world as we normally do, but we *must* use the physical world to talk about the non-physical world. Using the non-physical to talk about the physical is straightforward. Everybody does it all the time. We use the features of the non-physical world, *abstractions* and *concepts*, to describe or explain the physical sensible world. To use the physical world to talk about the non-physical world, on the other hand, means using physical objects and phenomena to describe or explain *emotions*, *ideas* and *experiences*, features of life that have no physical counterpart. The only way to do this

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is by making use of the full range of metaphor: analogy, allegory, simile, symbol, myth, fable, fairy-tale, reification, personification – in other words, all the techniques of poetic language in its broadest sense.

9. There is a difference between the artificial man-made abstractions that make up the stuff of scientific and technological terminology and give us our classification of the everyday physical world, and the abstractions that we use to describe emotions and qualities, all our felt experiences and abstractions, which enable us to manage the ever-present meaning in our existence, even if we aren't always able to grasp it. The words used as labels for the former are definable and the concepts are either directly quantifiable or a means of counting can be incorporated in the definition of the label. The latter kind is not referred to as *ineffable* for nothing. The words used to name the qualities cannot be defined and cannot be quantified. Literally they have no dimensions: the content labelled is not physical in any way.
10. We can find a way of expressing such concepts that shows us partially what some aspect of a quality is like, but we have to remember that it takes the whole play of *Othello* to show us just part of what *jealousy* is like, *Macbeth* to show us a bit of *ambition's* make-up, and *Romeo and Juliet* to express something of the nature of *love*. This is what poets, prophets, and other artists, people who know how to use the language of metaphor, myth, and symbol, do. They record their observations of non-physical phenomena, those facts which bypass our system of sensory perception and are only perceptible

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to our *minds* – itself an ineffable concept. Wittgenstein and Wisdom often mentioned St Augustine's comment on *time*: that he knew what it was until he had to explain to someone else what it was. We all know what our *mind* is, until we are asked to say what it is. Because these ideas are ineffable, when asked to define the term we are using, the best we can do is give examples of some aspects of the quality: describe a compassionate act when asked to define *compassion*, for example. Any serious definition would be incomplete or inconsistent – unless, of course, we put the quality on a Procrustean bed to transform it into something definable and quantifiable. This yields a man-made imitation of the quality with the illusion of understanding it. There are also artificial constructed concepts which have no physical counterpart, such as ideological labels or notions like *progress*. We are at the *Gödel point*.

11. It proved a good idea to be clear about the level at which our discourse was situated and the appropriate way it was validated, the nature of its truth, if you will. The nearest to the way things are, to what is the case, is the level of *observation*. Here *completeness* and *accuracy* are the criteria: the more complete and accurate the observation, the more valuable it is. The same goes for the *description* of the observation. This is further removed from the fact than the observation itself and requires the additional criterion of *comprehensibility*: the easier to understand a description, the more valuable it is. The final level is that of *explanation*. Here the validating criterion is *helpfulness*. The objective of

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observing our environment is to understand it and move in it wisely: the more an explanation helps us to understand something, the more valuable it is. To those with a classical education this is recognizably the old classification of *pragma*, *techne*, and *sophia*. It can be applied to help clarify what is going on, whether we are observing a cell under a microscope, our child's feelings by looking in its eyes, or a figment of our imagination. When the aim is to help understand and organize our observations of something which is physical, we tend to call the explanation a *theory* or a *hypothesis*. On the other hand, where our aim has been to help understand and organize our observations of the non-physical – the spiritual, psychological, and emotional aspects of life – the explanation takes the form of a *myth,* whatever it may be called. In the past this has fuelled drama and poetry. Nowadays other imaginative works of fiction tend to be used: novels, films, and TV drama series. The fact that these forms are seen as entertainment tends to obscure their function as aids to comprehension, comprehension of non-physical matters: events, personalities, and kinds of behaviour. We must avoid being misled by the use in myth and fiction of historical fact, and the merging of metaphorical personifications with biographical details of actual personalities. This does not alter their metaphorical function. Scientific theories, myths, dramas, and novels all logically form the same level of discourse, namely that of *explanation*.

12. Another source of confusion is the mistake some people make of attributing meaning, predictive power for example, to physical,

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> inanimate, objects or physical phenomena. Actually, this is a form of superstition. This mistake is often apparent nowadays in statistical analysis, where meaning, and especially predictive power, is attributed to the measurement of collections of data which it is assumed represent physical facts. The opposite mistake is also made, of course. In this case literal language, labels for artificial abstractions, quantifications, defined concepts, and forms of reification and personification are used to describe observations of non-physical aspects of life, as if they were actual physical objects and people with actual physical dimensions. This is often seen nowadays in psychological work. The *intelligence* or the *empathy* we think we can measure is not the same *empathy* or *intelligence* that we understand, but, like St Augustine, can't say what it is. Average profiles of people and surveys are also examples. It's easy to overlook the fact that mathematical, logical, rational thought is purely formal and reveals nothing about reality until forms are firmly anchored to insight and observations. It's the validity of this tie that's so often overlooked. It's the danger Aristotle alluded to of *logos* without *nous* – which we can interpret as *reason* without *insight*.

There is a fascinating story to be told one day: that of the history of the teaching of wisdom. It will be difficult to do, because so much of it was done through verbal interaction, so many records involve translation, often from languages no longer in use, and so much has had to be shrouded in secrecy for historical reasons of security. At different stages in the story, most of the twelve points I've

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tried to delineate above would be discernible, together with others, which were not considered, because at the time we were directly concerned only with the development of philosophical thought and not the development of the human being as a whole. One of these would have been the need for the teacher to act as mirror in the way Socrates explained to Alcibiades, as well as providing a default source for experiencing qualities which an individual has not yet had the opportunity to encounter in the normal course of life – someone, for example, who has never experienced *jealousy* or *compassion*. Another would have been that of mapping the stages of human development and the states which could be experienced, together with identifying the difference between a *stage* and a *state*. We have done this for children but have overlooked attempts made in the past to map adult development. The importance of knowing the background and training of the teacher would also normally be important. The need for safe houses, where great spiritual changes that are often traumatic can be safely undergone, would also probably have cropped up.

The difficulty with metaphor is that it is a form of mental energy, one that is often converted into other forms such as the dynamic energy apparent in the actions a metaphor can inspire. This creates problems when we're trying to recover the insights recorded in works from the past or from a different culture: the metaphors used to express the insights are now dead, they've lost their energy. Some become enshrined as clichés. To work, a metaphor has to resonate with both parties: the speaker/writer of the metaphor, and the listener/reader. How can someone who has never had anything to do with sheep, or perhaps never even seen a green field, possibly grasp the insight originally expressed in the metaphorical language of 'the Lord is my shepherd and leads me to green pastures'? It's the immediacy of the metaphor which gives it its power. In this particular case a subsequent emotional veneer has preserved the metaphor with a different power for some

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people. It has not, however, preserved the force of the original insight.

Throughout history people have constantly sought to attain that elusive and indefinable stage of development we label *wisdom*, the experience of which has variously been described as: seeing things with the eye of God, being free of the constraints of the ego's imposition, finding unity with being, comprehending as a whole both the physical aspects of life and the non-physical aspects, as well as a host of other images for this Holy Grail. Other people have used all their creativity to develop ways to help their fellow human beings achieve this.

For me, the really awe-inspiring aspect of the story of teaching wisdom is that these people have done this in the face of a continual history – on the part of the representatives of the orthodoxy of the day – of disparagement, ridicule, mockery, prohibition, persecution, banishment, expulsion, and even assassination. Despite the growth of *narcissism* and the increasing acceptance of self-centred mindsets, there are undoubtedly still seekers of wisdom about and still people around the world today who can help them, but it continues to be a covert business. Our current orthodoxies, whether scientific, secular, or religious, are all basically *sophiaphobic*. It's what happens, I suppose, when you're part of an establishment. You see yourself as the *owner of the truth*. It's also part of the wondrous nature of wisdom that, miraculously, seekers of it have so often managed to find their way to those who would be able to help them.

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