Educating for Wisdom: An Inquiry Into Values

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B.A., University of Victoria, 1996

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of Educational Studies)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
October, 1999

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ABSTRACT

Many of today's children find themselves with an unprecedented amount of freedom to choose what sort of life to pursue. A corollary of this freedom however is the burden of sorting through the many options which life offers. Without some guidance in wading through this values-minefield, some children simply become stuck, unable to choose or to choose well.

What is a good life? What sorts of goods in life ought we to pursue? These questions motivate the present project but they are not ones which I attempt to answer. Instead, I examine the kinds of tools that could help students to answer such questions in a thoughtful, intelligent and caring way.

In order to live a good life, we need to choose well regarding what is valuable. In this thesis I argue that such a process, choosing well about what is valuable, is the result of wisdom. Wisdom is that set of characteristics which allows us to live well. This thesis is the development and justification of this conception of wisdom. It explores how wisdom is related to three key concepts: knowledge, value and morality. I do not argue that this is the only way to think about wisdom. However, it is a way of thinking about wisdom which could usefully and justifiably find a place in the educational system of a liberal democratic state. This thesis is an attempt to understand how educators can teach for the most important goal in life: how to live well.
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And what is good, Phaedrus,
And what is not good—
Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?

Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

What is to be done with one’s life and force? Once a question mainly for philosophers, in these times of increasing complexity and change and abundance, it is a question that challenges almost all of us, although often we move through our lives unaware of it.

Louis Raths, Merrill Harmon and Sid Simon, *Values and Teaching*
Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

A young woman, contemplating her university direction and future career, ignores her love of literature and instead gives into societal pressure to get a 'useful' degree. She goes on to be a lawyer, a successful one, and yet she is left unfulfilled, regretting for the rest of her life her abandonment of literature.

A man, unwilling to face certain problems in his life, turns to drink. His fear of confronting these problems leads him to become an alcoholic and he spends the rest of his life battling the bottle.

A young man has the opportunity to make a lot of money selling drugs. He has a sense that this action will cause harm to the young buyers, but decides that his own wealth is more important. As he grows older and sees the lives he has helped destroy, he is consumed by guilt and remorse.

A woman, having won millions in a lottery, decides to quit work. She believes that being rich will fulfill all her needs and desires and so thinks that working has no value anymore. After a very short time, she finds herself growing restless with her life. With no projects in life that require any effort or hard-work, the woman finds that nothing she does is at all fulfilling or rewarding.

These examples, while all fictitious, are easily imaginable in our society. There are a number of ways to describe what has gone wrong in each scenario. One way of characterizing each of the characters might be to claim they lack wisdom (though in each of the first three scenarios we can imagine extenuating circumstances which would suggest that it was not primarily a lack of wisdom which led to the decision). In each case, a person is forced to choose
between two (or more) options regarding what is valuable in life. In each case someone has chosen badly—with destructive consequences. I want to claim that to choose badly about what is valuable in life is to lack wisdom. Re-worded, wisdom is \textit{judging well about what is valuable}.

There are, of course, many different ways of understanding what wisdom is. In his general survey \textit{Wisdom Through the Ages}, Daniel N. Robinson (1990, p.13-24) frequently uses the expression "seeing through". There is a sense that our everyday world is merely a veil which hides the ‘true, timeless, unchangeable’ truths. Wisdom is the capacity to move aside this veil and to ‘see’ the eternal truths. For many of the ancient Greeks (amongst others), wisdom was attained by a process of intellectual knowing. If we can rationally know the true nature of the universe then we will know how to live well. A similar view is shared by many eastern philosophies. However, in these eastern doctrines the understanding of the universe is not an intellectual one, but rather an experiential one. By purifying our minds and ‘knowing’ the world through our senses, we will be wise. A third path can be seen in many Christian scholars, who believe this process of ‘seeing through’ was (is) accomplished by receiving the divine word of God.

There are also many ways of talking about wisdom that do not appeal to universal truths. One such view has wisdom being a practical matter (see, for example, Kekes’ discussion 1983, p.280-83). Knowing how to achieve our goals is all that matters. A different view holds that wisdom is being virtuous and so it is, fundamentally, a moral term (see, for example, Rice 1958, p.1-13). All of these are potentially useful ways of talking about wisdom. However, for reasons explained below, I will not adopt any of them.

In what follows in this thesis, I look to the concept of wisdom and explore how it could
become a goal of education. We can imagine numerous contexts in which we use the term, which belies the fact that there is very little agreement on what exactly wisdom is. As a general starting point, I turn to the American philosopher John Kekes, who claims: “Wisdom is like love, intelligence, decency, and justice in that it is a good thing to have and the more a person has of it the better he is” (1983, p.277). While we may differ in thinking what wisdom consists of and may disagree as to what realms of life it pertains, there can be, I think, wide-spread agreement that wisdom is a good thing. Further, I’ll assume that wisdom is something which allows its possessor to live a good life.

I realize that this talk of wisdom is quite vague. To an extent this is purposeful. It is not my intention in this thesis to argue for a specific definition of wisdom. Within our society we can probably find wide-spread agreement about some characteristics that a wise person will have. There may also be some fairly substantial disagreement about other characteristics that a wise person may or may not possess. Agreement may be further diluted when we ask what a wise person would do in a given situation. Within this thesis, I am not concerned with resolving these issues. Instead, I want to develop a conceptual tool which will help us to start thinking about wisdom and how it applies to the educational context which I will set-out in the next chapter.

There may seem something contradictory about developing a conception of something which I leave undefined. However, as the thesis unfolds, the reader will see that there is a purpose to this. Part of this project of educating for wisdom is to get students to think critically about what exactly wisdom is and what it entails. The answers they come up with may not necessarily be good ones. However, the process of deciding for oneself what wisdom is is one step along the path to becoming wise.
The wisdom which I am aiming for in this project is one which permeates one's entire life. Though we can speak about a wise doctor or a wise teacher, this is not the use of wisdom I am interested in. Rather I am looking for that wisdom which allows a person qua person to be wise. Amongst other things this involves critical thinking skills, sound intellectual judgement and the dispositions to act on these two capacities. It is a characteristic (or series of characteristics) which apply widely to a person's life. While we might look at a specific instance and say that was a wise choice or act, this is not the wisdom I am talking about. Wisdom is something we attribute to a person when all (or at least most) of her actions and choices can be described as wise.

Before embarking on this project, there are two areas which need to be clarified. The first follows from the points of the previous paragraphs. Because there is such wide disagreement about what wisdom is, any attempt to settle the question univocally will fall on deaf ears. In developing my conception of wisdom, I do not imply that there are not other useful ways of conceptualizing wisdom. What my conception will be is but one way of talking about wisdom. It is, further, a conception which is consistent with other goals which we will pursue within an educational system in a liberal democratic state. In this sense, I am not critiquing the educational system as it is. There may well be other possible educational systems within which we could better pursue the goal of wisdom. But my intention is to take the system as it currently exists in Canadian society, with its responsibilities given our (vaguely) liberal democratic society, and to develop a conception of wisdom which can be pursued within this context.

The second clarification I want to make is to stress that what follows is not a simple how-to guide to wisdom. I do not believe that wisdom is something which is teachable and I certainly
am not designing a curriculum to teach wisdom. However, I do believe we can teach for wisdom. My project will be to find what constituent elements might contribute to the development of wisdom. As the conception evolves, it will become clear that these elements are not sufficient conditions for wisdom. Nor are they necessary conditions (there are, I am sure, numerous processes one can undertake in an attempt to attain wisdom). Instead, I will establish how the development of these constituent elements can be a useful first step down the path to wisdom.

In developing this conception of wisdom, I will follow two main paths. First, I will begin by exploring what others have said wisdom is and showing why their conceptions are not the best ones for my purpose. In essence, I will begin by saying what wisdom (as I will conceptualize it) is not. The second path will be to examine other issues (knowledge, value and morality) and to explore their relationship to wisdom. In doing this, I hope to create a composite picture which will clarify what is involved in my conception.

The first stage of this project will be to set the context of education in which this conception will fall. As I stated earlier, the goal of this project is to set this conception of wisdom within the general context of our current political (and its related educational) system. My characterization of this political system is meant not as a strictly empirical claim but rather as a partially prescriptive one. Brushing aside the question of whether Canada really is a liberal democracy or not, I explore what educational aims would be appropriate and necessary within a liberal democracy. There can be, of course, wide disagreement as to what these aims should be. However, my analysis will point to general features of liberal democratic theory which have (near) universal agreement. My point is not to develop anything new or original in social
philosophy but rather to set some boundaries under which my conception of wisdom will fall.

The third chapter will canvas various conceptions of wisdom prevalent throughout history. Throughout western philosophy, wisdom has had a very close connection with knowledge. This chapter will explore various ways in which knowledge has been equated to, or associated with, wisdom and show how these are all deficient (at least for my purposes). What is lacking from most of these analyses is the appreciation of the role that value-judgements play in wisdom. Various characterizations of wisdom-as-knowledge attempt to accommodate value-judgements. I am skeptical about their success. However, for the purpose of this thesis I will not evaluate the success of such arguments but point instead to how they fail to satisfy the basic liberal democratic axiom from which I begin.

The fourth chapter then will be an examination of values and what role they play in wisdom. This chapter will also look at where our values come from, how they are revised and how they are related to knowledge. By the end of this fourth chapter, some sense of the conception will have emerged and we can begin to look at how this wisdom might be cultivated within a school setting. Specifically, I will argue that a project of values-clarification, like the one Louis Raths (see, for example, Raths et al., 1966) developed, is a useful first step. However, a second and crucial step (one which Raths and his colleagues were seemingly less concerned with) is a process of evaluation of these values and their consequences within our lives and society.

The fifth chapter will look to the relationship between wisdom and morality. Morality is only one area of value-judgement, but it is an important one. By examining this relationship, I will more fully flesh-out the conception of wisdom which I am proposing. There are three basic
questions which will guide this chapter. The first question will explore whether or not there are any values which educators can and should promote. Some theorists argue this line on the basis that there are values which are necessarily central to any good life. In addressing this question, I will use Ronald Dworkin’s (1990) discussion of critical and volitional interests as a starting point. A second way of arguing along these lines is to claim that certain values are necessary not for a good life, but for the success of a democracy. I will explore one such argument in the works of R.S. Peters.

The second and third questions are inter-related: is it possible to be moral without being wise? Is it possible to be wise without being moral?

A final chapter will look to question the success of this conception of wisdom. In bringing together all of the essential features I have developed to this point, I will produce a summary of the conception. Once the conception is laid-out in full, there will be four tasks that follow, each one meant to be an evaluation of the conception. If this conception which I will develop is to be successful, it will need to satisfy at least the following four criteria: 1) it must be consistent with other goals of an educational system in a liberal democratic state; 2) it must be at least reasonably close to our everyday usage of the term wisdom; 3) where it differs from our common understanding of the term, I will need to be able to provide good reasons why this difference is acceptable; and 4) most crucially, it must have some value; that is, the conception must be useful in some way, it must contribute something important to the educational project. In the final chapter, I will take each of these four criteria in turn and explore how my conception measures up.

I urge the reader to keep in mind the essential proviso of this introduction. I am in no
way arguing that mine is the only conception of wisdom possible, nor necessarily the best. My project is far more modest in aim. What I do claim is that my conception is a good way to think and talk about wisdom and one which can be useful in our current educational context.
Chapter II: The Democratic Context

The purpose of this short chapter will be to set the context in which I will develop my conception of wisdom. There are two reasons why this is necessary. First, because wisdom is such a vast topic, without any kind of context it would be very difficult to focus discussion. Second, because my concern is with implementing this wisdom project within Canadian public schools, we need to have some basic understanding of what should be going on in schools.

As my goal is to develop a conception of wisdom which could be integrated into our current school-system, the political context I set is that of a liberal democracy. Some may disagree that we in Canada are actually living in a liberal democracy, but that is not an argument I want to take up here. Instead, I will assume we are (at least sufficiently) a liberal democratic state and draw out principles from this assumption.

A basic liberal democratic axiom from which I will work in this thesis is that each individual must be allowed to choose for himself what will constitute a good life. In other words, individuals must have the freedom and capacity to pursue their own projects and goals; projects and goals which they themselves decide are important. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, by a good life I do not mean The Good Life. The point is that each must choose for himself; there is thus no one, universally decreed, good life.

When I spoke of freedom above, it was not meant to imply that ‘anything goes’. My right to pursue my own goals is balanced by the competing rights and freedoms of others. This is why a society needs to have laws. We need rules to govern and limit our pursuit of what we think is a life worth leading. Within the scope of these rules however, we need to be free. By unpacking what is involved in this freedom, we can gain some understanding of what role schools have to
Freedom to pursue my own goals is often understood to mean an absence of restraining factors. Being in prison physically restrains me from doing what I want to. Likewise, some kinds of threat can prevent me from choosing my desired path. In addition to these more obvious restraints, there are other, more subtle, ways that I can be prevented from pursuing my goals.

One is to lack the imagination to conceive of other ways of living. If I am not aware that there is a choice to be made (regarding what is the best way to live), then I cannot make that choice. A second lack of freedom is to realize that a choice is possible, but to be incapable of meaningfully making such a choice. If students have the tools to recognize different ways of living but not the ability to evaluate these various lives, then a choice, while possible, is essentially hollow. A third way in which freedom could be lacking is if we are pre-rationally conditioned (indoctrinated) to prefer one life over another. A society might profess freedom of sexual orientation. However, if the schools (and society at-large) successfully indoctrinate their young to believe monogamous heterosexual relationships are the only acceptable ones, then there is no real freedom of sexual orientation.

If this basic democratic principle is to have any teeth, then individuals must have the capacity to make a real, meaningful choice. It is the state’s responsibility to ensure (through education) that each individual has the capacity to make a meaningful choice about what life to pursue.

What follows in this thesis then will need to be consistent with this goal of allowing individuals to meaningfully choose for themselves what goods to pursue in life. As it will
emerge, my conception of wisdom will not only not contradict this liberal democratic goal, but will in fact go a long way to help realize it.

I realize that this abstract theoretical talk can be a bit vague. However, as issues emerge in the following chapters, I will be returning frequently to this fundamental liberal democratic principle. If it is not entirely clear at this point, it will become so as we discuss it in specific contexts.
Chapter III: Knowledge and Wisdom

III.i Introduction

Many theorists throughout history have attempted to equate wisdom with a specific type of knowledge. The purpose of this chapter will be two-fold. First, I will examine various ways in which wisdom has been formulated in western philosophy. Secondly, I will examine the connection between wisdom and knowledge. This is not meant to be a paper on epistemology and so I will not go into too much depth in terms of what knowledge is. I will use a working definition that states knowledge is some kind of true, justified belief. There are, of course, many ideas about what would constitute this justification. There are further problems regarding what exactly truth means in this definition. However, while recognizing these questions as important, I will try to side-step any of these controversies. For my purposes, it is not crucial to come to any agreement on these questions of justification or truth.

With this beginning, let us turn to Socrates and commence our exploration with him.

III.ii Socratic Wisdom

Near the beginning of the Apology, Socrates recounts a story of how he was judged to be the wisest person alive (Plato, 1981 edn. a). His friend Chairephon went to the oracle at Delphi and asked whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. The Pythian’s response: no (20e-21a). Socrates could not understand this answer as he recognized that: “I am not wise at all” (21b). Because Socrates had confidence in the oracle’s truth, he set out to make sense of what this answer could mean. He questioned those in Greek society reputed for their wisdom, the orators, the poets and the craftsmen and discovered that none of them possessed the kind of wisdom he
was interested in. People in the first two groups claimed knowledge over things which they did not really know. To the third group he conceded some wisdom. However, he found them in error in thinking that their knowledge of their specific craft gave them knowledge in other areas of life as well. The solution to the Pythian’s riddle, Socrates concluded, was this: that while he lacks the knowledge necessary for wisdom, he at least recognizes this lack and so is not fooled into thinking he is wiser than he is.

Throughout this speech Socrates uses the terms wisdom and knowledge interchangeably, suggesting that the two are, in some ways, synonymous. We can see this in his discussion of the craftsmen: “I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I” (22d).

This story is useful for our purposes in that there are three different types of wisdom being talked about; ‘craft-wisdom’, ‘human-wisdom’ and ‘higher-wisdom’. Each of the three has a corresponding type of knowledge which characterizes it. Following Socrates’ lead, I will examine each in turn.

III.i.a Craft-Wisdom: Expertise

In their introductory chapter to the book Knowledge, Teaching and Wisdom, Lehrer and Smith (1996) use the conception of judgement to distinguish between two types of knowledge:

The difference between common or ordinary knowledge--which does not make its possessor wise--and the kind of knowledge which does make its possessor wise is that the latter, but not the former, sort of knowledge makes its possessor into a qualified judge of his or her subject matter, an expert (p.4).

The judgements which Lehrer and Smith are talking about involve some kind of evaluation of
what has worth. This interpretation will make sense of Socrates’ claim that the craftsmen have a type of wisdom. Someone who is expert in a craft will possess the type of knowledge which will enable her to recognize what is worthy in a particular endeavour. Thus an expert shoe-maker will be able to make judgements necessary for producing good shoes and evaluating shoe quality. To this extent, the expert has wisdom in the domain of shoe-making.

To the modern reader, this type of craft-wisdom is more properly understood as a type of expertise. Simply by being an expert in one field of endeavour does not guarantee that I will live my life well. Because I want to reserve the term wisdom for that which allows us to live well, I want to claim that craft-wisdom is a misleading label. However, it is an important concept because Socrates (according to many of his readers) tries to extrapolate what is involved in this instance of wisdom to cover a broader conception of wisdom. In other words, he claims that living well is a type of craft and ‘wisdom proper’ is an analogous craft-wisdom which parallels the craft-wisdom of the shoe-maker. However, before turning to this ‘higher’ wisdom, we need to explore a second level of wisdom which is present in Socrates’ story.

III.ii.b Human Wisdom

Socrates admits that there are artisans in his Greece who have more craft-wisdom than he. He is also aware that he possesses none of what he terms ‘higher wisdom’. There is, thus, an apparent paradox in the oracle’s proclamation of him as the wisest man alive. The paradox is resolved, of course, in Socrates’ realization that he knows nothing of importance (Plato, 1981 edn. a).

According to many commentators (see for example, Brickhouse and Smith 1994, p.31 and Lehrer and Smith 1996, p.4-6), Socrates is unique in his ability to distinguish between two
types of knowledge. One makes its possessor wise, the other does not. While many of his contemporaries have knowledge of the second type, they mistakenly believe it is of the first type. As a result, they foolishly believe they are wiser than they really are. Socrates' 'human' wisdom lies in the fact that he knows which type of knowledge he has. His wisdom lies in the fact that he realizes he is not wise (in the sense of higher wisdom).

There are two features of this human-wisdom that I want to draw attention to. First of all, it raises an important question about self-knowledge. Traditionally wisdom has been connected with an awareness of one's limitations and capacities. This connection is an important one and any plausible account of wisdom will need to take account of it. In chapter 6 I will revisit this question with my conception of wisdom laid-out and show how this connection is integral.

Secondly, we will notice that this human wisdom, on its own, is not the type of wisdom we are concerned with in this thesis. Awareness of one's limitations may be a necessary condition of wisdom, but surely it cannot be sufficient. If a foolhardy person is aware of his foolishness, he is not, by virtue of that awareness, made wise. Awareness of limitations must combine with something else to make wisdom.

III.i. c Higher Wisdom

Let us now revisit Lehrer and Smith's exploration of higher wisdom (which, from here on in, I will use synonymously with wisdom). Recall their definition of wisdom as that type of knowledge which makes its possessor "a qualified judge of his or her subject matter, an expert" (1996, p.4). They then extrapolate this instance of craft-wisdom to include all cases of wisdom: "It is in the understanding of value, then, and the ability to evaluate as an expert, that knowledge
is made wisdom. And this understanding of value is not an addition to knowledge, it is itself the only knowledge truly worth pursuing” (1996, p.4). This connection of knowledge and value will seem strange to many contemporary ears. For us, knowledge involves some kind of justified belief. We debate to what extent that belief must be true and we debate what qualifies as an adequate justification of the belief. Modernist epistemological debates rarely, however, involve discussions of value. For Lehrer and Smith, this is an error the ‘ancients’ were free from (1996, p.5).

Lehrer and Smith’s definition is problematic for several reasons. Foremost (for my purposes) it is difficult to know how far ranging the wise person’s knowledge must extend. Consider the case of an expert shoe-maker. She has, according to Lehrer and Smith’s definition, the ability to evaluate as an expert. What is it though that she has knowledge of the value of? Certainly it must at least be what will constitute a good shoe. But by what criteria is this evaluation made? Is there some standard of *shoeness* against which all shoes will be judged? We can certainly imagine situations in which two avowed experts will disagree vehemently about whether a shoe has value qua shoe. It will depend upon what the expert believes the shoe’s function to be. A designer of high-fashion shoes may well have a different opinion of what a good shoe is than a designer of practical, sturdy walking-shoes.

The issue gets further muddied when we ask what end the shoe will be used for. Imagine a shoe-maker who has the capability of making some fantastic running-shoe which gives a sprinter a distinct advantage over her competitors. Imagine further that such a running-shoe is banned from all track and field competitions. According to Lehrer and Smith’s definition that an expert knows what is valuable, would the expert shoemaker make the superior, but banned, shoe?
Strictly considered as a shoe, the superior but banned runner has more value. However, when considered in a broader social context, it could reasonably be argued that such a shoe has less value. Does the wise shoemaker have knowledge just of shoes or of this broader social context? Following Socrates’ schema, it must surely be knowledge just of shoes. Recall that the craftsmen’s folly lay in their belief that being an expert in one, narrow domain qualified them as experts in a broader context. If an expert shoemaker believes this expertise makes him an expert in other domains, he is lacking Socrates’ human wisdom. But if craft wisdom does not go beyond a narrow context, can the expert really claim to know what has value?

At best it seems that crafts-persons have a narrow expertise on value. This is not necessarily bad for Lehrer and Smith because they want to claim that there is a broader ‘craft’, life, for which an expertise would be likewise broad. However, what my analysis has shown so far is that expertise is relative to a fixed end. One can only understand the value of shoes if one knows what ends shoes are meant to serve.¹

Lehrer and Smith are not explicit in how they think we can move from a craft to a higher-wisdom. However, to understand how this process might occur, we can look to Brickhouse and Smith’s (1994) exploration of this process. Brickhouse and Smith cite various passages intended to establish that Socrates does believe that higher wisdom is a type of craft knowledge (Euthyd.

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¹ An exception to this argument might be an expert artist. Part of what can make an artist great is her ability to push the bounds of what is generally considered the goal of the art. In this sense, it is wrong to talk about a fixed end in art. However, I am not convinced that when we are talking about such artistic genius we are talking about expertise. If expertise has any place in talk of art, I think it has more to do with technical proficiency in a given medium. Only when this technical proficiency is combined with some artistic spark is there artistic genius. Thus, if we speak of an expert pianist, we are referring to someone who has high proficiency at accepted piano skills. When an artist is able to expand the set of what is considered accepted skills, I want to claim we have moved beyond the realm of expertise into a realm of artistic genius.
They then turn to the question of what wisdom will allow its possessor to do. Here they look to a passage from the *Laches* (Plato, 1973 edn.) in which Socrates claims that a wise person will be able to judge all bona fide cases of a given moral quality (199c3-4). This raises a problem regarding the Socratic method of inquiry. In his dialectical proceeding, Socrates often asks his discussants to explain what a particular term means. For example, Socrates asks Euthyphro (Plato 1981 edn. b) what piety is (Euthy, 5c-d). Most readers see this as Socrates asking for a definition of piety (or whatever other virtue is in question) in such cases. However, some, like Richard Kraut, disagree. They point to the significance of the above referenced passage from the *Laches*. If the knowledge which makes one wise will enable one to judge in all relevant cases, then surely a definitional knowledge will be inadequate. Simply knowing what piety is (for example), will not allow one to recognize piety in all cases. Nor will it guarantee that one will act piously. Thus, says Kraut, this cannot be the type of knowledge that will make its possessor wise (1984, 256). Instead of a definition, Kraut understands Socrates to be seeking "a substantive theory, organized around a small number of core statements, that will tell us how to decide all practical questions" (1984, p.282). For Kraut, this makes sense of why Socrates thinks himself so far from being truly wise: "He [Socrates] realizes that what he needs is not just one statement about virtue, or a few statements about the virtues, but an entire moral theory, of which he possesses only the elementary fragments" (1984, p.283-84).

Brickhouse and Smith disagree with Kraut’s interpretation. They point to the fact that Socrates’ interlocutors respond with definitions and that Socrates never says that that is not the type of answer he is looking for (Brickhouse and Smith, 1995, p.62). They do, however, agree that such definitional knowledge is not sufficient. Instead they see it as one constituent of several
which go together to form wisdom. Here they draw the parallel to the type of craft-wisdom which the physician has:

If health is the *ergon* [product] of the physician’s craft, then the knowledge in virtue of which one is a physician is knowledge of whatever is relevant to the production of health. This will of course include the definition of “medicine,” since obviously the physician needs to know what his or her craft is. Moreover, it will include knowledge of what external items are needed to bring about health in each particular instance. Finally, such knowledge will include knowledge of what techniques must be employed to bring about health. So, by ascertaining the *ergon* of a craft, we can find out something about what sort of non-definitional knowledge is necessary to be an actual practitioner of that craft (1994, 64).

According to this analogy then, the wise person knows these various things (the definition of *x*, what external items are needed to bring about *x*, techniques to bring about *x*, etc.) not with regard to medicine, but rather in regard to life itself. As the doctor’s *ergon* is health, so the wise person’s *ergon* is living well.

We might agree that each of these specified types of knowledge is necessary for a physician to perform well. However, notice what is absent from this passage. There is no mention at all about what exactly health is. Just as in the shoe-maker example above, there is no criteria by which to judge what constitutes a good pair of shoes, so here are we lacking criteria to judge what health is. It would not be too difficult to create some criteria for shoes because there is wide agreement about the ends shoes serve for us. It would be somewhat trickier to come up with a consensus regarding criteria to evaluate health because there is a broader range of beliefs about what constitutes good health (is it merely physical well-being? mental well-being as well? spiritual well-being?). However, we likely could come to some agreement because there are enough guidelines to tell us what state a human (or other organism) needs to be in to continue to exist. The case gets that much more tricky when we ask what constitutes a life well lived.
The only way I can make sense of Brickhouse and Smith's interpretation of Socratic wisdom is to assume that the ends of human life are fixed and not open to debate. If this were the case then we could be experts in life (i.e. wise) because we could know exactly what it means to live well. This position makes sense within a Platonic metaphysics, where there is a 'Form' of the 'Good'. Such a Form is objective, fixed and knowable. However, while this may salvage Socratic wisdom, it is not a tenable position for me to hold.

As I wrote in the introductory chapter, I have little confidence that there are good grounds for accepting such a Platonic metaphysics. However, that metaphysical argument is not crucial to the argument at hand. Even if Plato were correct, this would still not be an acceptable goal of education in a liberal democratic state. There are two related reasons for this.

The first is that it is difficult to produce evidence for the existence of such metaphysical realities. We can certainly have commitments (to religions or some other belief-systems) which guide our lives. But unless these beliefs are open to critical evaluation, they do not belong in the curricula of our schools. Unless students can critically engage beliefs and ideas, they have no way of evaluating and judging them for themselves whether the beliefs are good ones or not. In the absence of such evaluation, teaching is reduced to simple indoctrination, which is not an acceptable practice by the state in a liberal democracy.

The second reason follows also from the nature of liberal democratic states. One of the most fundamental principles of any such political organization is that each citizen must have the opportunity to freely and autonomously choose for herself what goods in life to pursue. Even if it could be conclusively argued that there is one Good Life for all human beings (though what this proof would look like I do not know), it would not permit states to impose this Good Life on
its future citizens (for a more detailed discussion of this argument, see Gutmann 1987, p.25-28).

In the absence of such a Platonic metaphysics, or something like it, I cannot see how knowledge and wisdom can be equated as Socrates and his commentators have tried to do. However, this is merely one instance of an attempt to equate wisdom and knowledge. Let us now turn our attention to another way in which this project has been tackled.

**III.iii Kekes**

In his article entitled *Wisdom*, John Kekes (1983) asks the same fundamental question as I am dealing with: what is wisdom? He canvases two traditional conceptions, what he calls theoretical and practical wisdom. I will begin this section by exploring what he means with each of these terms and showing why he rejects them. I will then turn to an examination of what he proposes in their place. I will conclude by critiquing his position.

**III.iii.a Theoretical Wisdom**

Kekes points to such theorists as Plato, Aristotle (in certain writings) and Spinoza as examples of writers who strive for a theoretical wisdom. Kekes defines this as "an intellectual matter having primarily to do with knowledge" (p.281). He goes on to claim that the knowledge is of a metaphysical variety: "it is of first principles, of fundamental truths about reality" (p.281). In other words, this position holds that if only we can (rationally) understand the metaphysical reality underlying our actions, the path for us to choose will become obvious. Our actions will be guided by a knowledge of reality and so will be wise.

The oft-quoted example of this type of view is Plato's allegory of the Cave (Plato, Republic, bk VII). Once the person in the cave refines his intelligence to a requisite degree, he
sees that what he thought was the extent of reality is really only a shadow of reality. With this knowledge, he can then go out into the world and see it truly for the first time. The same purification of the intellect motivates Spinoza’s _Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect_ (1992 edn.), and other projects.

Along with Kekes, I want to reject this formulation of wisdom. Kekes’ objection to this is two-fold. The first is that the position rests on a rather obscure type of knowledge, making it available only to a select few. In contrast, he believes that wisdom is a possibility for everyone. Secondly, such a position is dependent on _a priori_ truths. Kekes wants to deny that any exist.

While either of these objections may have some merit, my dismissal of this formulation ties into the concrete realities of education. As my rejection of Socrates’ ‘higher-wisdom’ above argued, such a teaching for wisdom has no place in the schools of a liberal democratic state because it predetermines what is good. Such teachings do not allow students to decide for themselves what goods to pursue in life.

III.iii.b Experiential Wisdom

Before moving onto Kekes treatment of practical wisdom, I want to take this opportunity to briefly explore a corollary to the theoretical wisdom of the previous section. I call this experiential wisdom because it seeks to gain an understanding of the ‘True’ nature of the cosmos not through intellectual pursuits, but through experience. Other than this very important difference, this type of wisdom is very similar to Kekes’ theoretical one. It holds that for us to be wise, we need to uncover the reality underlying our world of appearances. This wisdom is the goal of many eastern religions. In the western tradition it can be found most prominently in the ecstatic poetry of the Christian mystics (St. John of the Cross, Meister Ekhart, Teresa of Avila,
etc.). While this may be one path to wisdom, I want to reject it for my purposes. For the same reasons that the pursuit of a theoretical wisdom is not appropriate in our education system, so too is this experiential wisdom inappropriate.

That said, I think there may be something which can be accomplished in schools to further our likelihood of a fuller experiential understanding. Just as the conception I am developing is only an exploration of some of the constituent elements which can help lead us to wisdom, so too might an educational project be to develop some of the constituent elements which can lead toward an experiential wisdom. This seems to be the path that Don Cochrane is following in his pursuit of wisdom (Cochrane 1995, 1997). He talks about fostering such attitudes as awe, wonder and reverence as ways of helping us to experience our world more fully. Such a project can be seen as well in various feminist and ecologically-minded theorists who want to focus more on the relationships between people and on our interaction with the natural world around us.

These approaches may have a lot of value and there is no reason why they could not be combined, one with another, and all with the pursuit I am outlining. However, my project in this thesis is to explicate a more critically-minded way of pursuing wisdom (that is, a pursuit of wisdom through critical-thinking). So, apart from this brief mention of these other possible ways of educating for wisdom, I shall not deal with them further.

Let us then return to Kekes and his discussion of practical wisdom.

III.iii.c Practical Wisdom

Unlike theoretical wisdom, which seeks to understand the reality underlying the world of
appearances, practical wisdom looks no further than our everyday world of experience. According to Kekes, “[p]ractical wisdom is mainly action-guiding” and “the knowledge involved in practical wisdom is of means to ends” (1983, p.281). There are many things that might be said about the practically wise person; she might be shrewd, resourceful, clever, cunning, prudent or any one of a host of other traits. In short, she knows how to fulfill her goals. However, as Kekes objects, this in no way assures her that she will lead a good life. In fact, all of these traits and whatever else might contribute to her being practically wise may cause her to live badly. What is missing from this action-guiding, means to ends, wisdom is an appreciation of what ends have worth. It is in such an appreciation that Kekes sees wisdom lying and so turns to this question of how we know what ends are worth pursuing.

Before we continue with Kekes’ discussion, it needs to be noted here that Kekes’ characterization of practical wisdom is not representative of many views on the subject. For many people, practical wisdom is very definitely concerned with ends and which ends have value. I will return to this position at the end of chapter 4 and explore how there might be more to practical wisdom than Kekes allows.

III.iii.d Descriptive vs. Interpretive Knowledge

Kekes wants to claim that knowledge is necessary for choosing worthwhile ends. However, it is not just any type of knowledge which will do. Instead he draws a distinction between descriptive and interpretive knowledge and makes an argument that it is the latter type which is crucial.

Kekes uses the example of Ivan Ilyitch to illustrate the difference between these two types
of knowledges. Ivan is the title-character of a Tolstoy novel (1886/1921 edn.). On his death-bed
Ivan looks back over his life and realizes his failure to accept his mortality. In this failure is the
failure of his entire life. Because he did not accept his mortality, he did not live well as a mortal
being would have. Factually, Ivan knew that he was mortal and so was going to die. However,
Ivan did not interpret this knowledge. In other words, he did not understand the significance of
his mortality and so did not act in life in light of this significance. Thus, when he came to die, he
felt he had lived a shallow, wasted life—but it was too late. The plain fact of his mortality is
descriptive knowledge. Knowledge of the consequences and significance of this descriptive
knowledge is interpretive knowledge. It is the second kind which is involved with wisdom: “The
facts a wise man knows are known by everybody. Wisdom consists, partly, in understanding the
significance of what everybody knows” (Kekes, p.280).

There are two problems I have with Kekes’ reading of this situation. The first is rather
minor. Kekes seems to be arguing that while Ilyitch knew on one level that he was mortal, he
never really believed that he was going to die. We talk this way frequently. Seeing young adults
and children acting recklessly, we attribute to them a belief that they are immortal. I think this
simply makes no sense. No one I’ve ever met (at least over the age of twelve) has failed to
accept that they are going to die, regardless of how recklessly they live their lives. I find it hard
to believe that Ivan, or anyone else, could really fail to believe that one day they will die. To
deny this is really to have no descriptive knowledge at all. This objection is merely to question
whether there is such a distinct line between descriptive and interpretive knowledge as Kekes
presents them.

The more crucial problem, both for Kekes and for my argument, is that what Kekes wants
to call interpretive knowledge is really no knowledge at all. Kekes wants to claim that if Ivan had true interpretive knowledge, he would realize the significance of his mortality and so live appropriately in light of this knowledge. But what does this word appropriate mean? Let us cast two different Ivans to illustrate the problem here. The first Ivan is a real risk-taker, an adrenalin junkie. The other is very much a quiet, contemplative, Ivan, very scared of the world and of taking risks.

Kekes would have us believe that true interpretive knowledge will allow us to live well in light of the significance of certain factors, such as our mortality. Consider the first Ivan, he who believes the worthy life is one lived to the fullest. Interpreting his mortality, he would consider the good life to be one full of adventure and risks, highly dangerous but invigorating. The second Ivan, confronted with the same reality of mortality, would judge the good life to be one free from risk and danger, a life which maximizes life-expectancy and not quantity of adrenalin. How are we to account for these two different, but both legitimate, interpretations of the same set of facts as knowledge?

If I claim to know the world is round, I cannot at the same time claim to know it is flat. Further, I cannot accept your claim to know that it is flat. You might believe it is flat, but belief is different from knowledge. To qualify as a knowledge claim, there needs to be some justification and truth to the belief (as noted earlier, just what this justification might be is a contentious issue which has produced many different answers). If we talk of knowing how to do something, knowledge can range over many possibilities. For example, if I claim to know how to ride a bike, there is nothing which prevents you from knowing how to ride a bike in a way different from me. However, Kekes makes it clear that he is not talking about a know how: “The
knowledge we seek is not descriptive. Nor is it knowing how to do some particular task” (1983, p.278). In contrast to this know how, propositional knowledge does not allow for a range of conflicting answers in a given situation.

If we are to accept as legitimate the interpretations of the significance of their mortality by the two Ivans above, then there must be something more than knowledge involved here. And this makes sense when we actually break down the process of how significance would be generated from descriptive knowledge. Only when we have some notion of what constitutes a good life can we interpret the significance of some knowledge about our lives. Kekes wants to claim that knowledge of the significance can generate for us these beliefs about what is valuable in life. However, the true process is somewhat reversed. Only when we filter knowledge through some already existing value system does this knowledge gain any significance\(^2\). In retrospect it might help us to revise our beliefs about what is worthwhile (an exploration of this process is the business of the next chapter). However, knowledge, be it descriptive or interpretive, does not, on its own, generate or make obvious what ends have worth. Thus Kekes’ interpretive knowledge cannot be equated with wisdom.

\(^2\) It is now widely (and rightly, I think) believed that all knowledge comes to us already filtered through some kind of social value system. What we consider to deserve the label knowledge depends on standards of justification and inference, which standards are products of specific value systems. I will talk more about this next chapter. My claim here, however, is a different one. What I am suggesting here is that knowledge will gain significance only when it is filtered through a personal value system. What will be considered knowledge is dependent on a social value system and what significance that knowledge will have is dependent on a personal value position.
III.iv Conclusion

There have been two main purposes in this chapter. First, I have looked at several different ways in which wisdom has been conceptualized throughout western philosophy. I have looked specifically at various formulations which equate wisdom with a specific type of knowledge. In both Socrates’ ‘higher wisdom’ and Kekes’ wisdom through ‘interpretative knowledge’, I have argued that there is the crucial element of value which cannot be adequately accounted for. Both think that we can make knowledge claims about what is valuable. I have raised doubts about whether such knowledge claims are possible.

There is, of course, an obvious way in which we can (and do) make knowledge claims about what is valuable. There is nothing to prevent me from saying that I know what I find valuable or to claim to know what someone else finds valuable. However this is not the claim that Socrates or Kekes is making. They are claiming it is possible to know what is valuable, not what is valuable for someone or something. We do use language in this way at times, claiming to know that something is wrong or to know that something is bad. What I have tried to draw attention to is the special usage of the word ‘know’ in these instances. To know something is bad is a very different type of knowledge from knowing that this desk that I sit at is 2.3 metres long.

Knowledge of the length of the desk does not depend upon the knower (except in the obvious sense of using the words in the same way as other people). Conversely, knowledge of value does depend upon the knower and some initial principles from which she starts. We can know that an act is wrong only in reference to some principle which the act violates. Given this starting position, then we might want to say that our belief (that the act is wrong) is true and
justified. The knowledge itself does not give us these principles. This, however, is what Socrates and Kekes have tried to argue.

In addition to questioning the appropriateness of this use of ‘knowledge’, I have also claimed that even if such knowledge were possible, the type of justification it relies upon is not acceptable for inclusion in the education of liberal democratic states (an argument for this will follow in the next chapter).

The second, and more important, purpose of this chapter follows from the analysis of the previous point. I have established how wisdom is tied very closely to some notion of value. To get a better understanding of what wisdom is and how it might be pursued we need to have a better understanding of what values are. This will be the task of the next chapter.
Chapter IV: Wisdom and Value

IV.i Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that wisdom is not merely a special type of knowledge. I outlined several theories which attempted to prove this and showed how they were inadequate because they assume we can make knowledge claims about what is valuable. The purpose of this chapter will be to look more closely at values. This exploration will help to clarify why we have reason to suspect that values cannot be known. It will also provide us with a way of understanding what values are that is not dependent upon knowable values.

I will begin the chapter by setting what I call the regress problem. From there, I will turn to exploring a feminist critique of knowledge. My analysis in the preceding chapter might be criticized for having too narrow a conception of what knowledge is. I will thus explore a position outlined by Helen Longino which seeks to bring value elements into the question of what knowledge is. From there, I will examine one of the most influential attempts to bring values education into schools, the values-clarification project. I will then turn to John Dewey's theory of value which gives a more robust picture of values than that offered by the values clarification project. I will conclude the chapter by returning to the regress problem and offering some suggestions as to how we might (at least partially) resolve the problem.

IV.ii The Regress Problem

If we recall from the previous chapter, Lehrer and Smith claimed that “the person who knows understands what has worth, and the person who understands what has worth is wise” (1996, p.5). Accepting this for the moment, we are still faced with the question of how we come
to understand what has worth. According to Lehrer and Smith, such an understanding is arrived at by evaluating the belief or preference under question. However, if we are to question the worth of \( x \), we need recall to some other belief or preference which justifies \( x \). However, this second belief (\( y \)), will need to be submitted to the same scrutiny to judge the worth of it, and so on. There seems to be an endless spiral here which Lehrer and Smith recognize, and so pose the question “[m]ust we accept something and prefer something without reason or justification? And, if not, how do we avoid the regress?” (1996 p.10).

In what remains of their chapter, Lehrer and Smith try to answer this last question and so avoid the regress. Their answer, without getting into too much detail, is similar to the recognition of The Good which Plato wrote of, or Descartes’ ‘clear and distinct perception’ (see 1641/1986 edn.). In other words, we are naturally equipped with some kind of intuition which, if heeded properly, will point us toward what has genuine worth. In that these intuitions are trustworthy, we are provided with a foundation of values to which we can refer questions of other values.

Commentators of both Plato and Descartes have recognized problems with this kind of scenario. With Descartes, short of reference to a benevolent God, how can we trust that these clear and distinct perceptions are actually true? For Plato, how can we be sure what we are perceiving is actually The Good? Why should we even accept that such a thing exists? In place of knowing what is valuable, I will argue that it makes more sense to speak of having value-commitments. There are certain things we hold valuable because we believe they are what constitute a good life.

The task guiding this chapter shall be to examine the nature of values and how they are
evaluated. As a starting point, I want to look at a feminist critique of mainstream epistemology, specifically in the work of Helen Longino. Longino wants to argue against any conception of knowledge which is divorced from value. Though apparently at odds with the arguments of the previous chapter, I will show that there is actually not a tension between Longino’s position and mine. This clarification will then be a spring-board to look at values in more depth.

**IV.iii Knowledge and Values: Their Connection Reconsidered**

An important rejoinder to my position can be found in some feminist critiques of mainstream epistemology. I have been arguing so far that knowledge claims are best conceived of as independent from value. Many theorists, like Helen Longino, rightly argue that what is considered knowledge is very much tied up with values. There appears to be a contradiction in my asserting both that Longino is correct and that knowledge claims are independent of value. This contradiction can be resolved if we make the following crucial distinction. It is one thing to claim that knowledge and value are related, that various value-systems are involved in the production of knowledge. It is another to claim that we can make knowledge claims about what is valuable. As I will show below, Longino and others are arguing the first of these claims. I agree fully that values are very directly involved in knowledge production. However, I do not think that this feminist critique of traditional epistemology establishes in any way that we can make knowledge claims regarding what is valuable.

In her essay *Subjects, Power, and Knowledge: Description and Prescription in Feminist Philosophies of Science* (1993), Longino canvasses various feminist critiques of traditional epistemology. One way to get at the crucial issues is to follow Longino’s (and others’, see
Popper 1959; Harding 1991, p.116) distinction between “the context of discovery” and “the context of justification” (Longino 1993, p.102). Longino claims that “philosophers in the past who made this distinction sometimes concluded that only the context of justification is worthy of philosophical analysis” (1993, p.102). Longino argues that this is problematic because there are important questions surrounding “how hypotheses are generated” (1993, p.102). The types of questions which get asked and the subjects/objects which are considered worthy of investigation are all influenced by certain value-positions. Values too play a role in determining what sorts of evidence will be accepted, what kinds of justifications will be considered good ones.

Longino’s analysis is much deeper than this. But even at this level, we can see that it is impossible to reasonably believe that knowledge and value are unrelated. However, to establish a connection is not to establish that values are knowable (in an objective, metaphysical sense). The theorists from the previous chapter would argue that we can know what is valuable. That is, they would claim it is possible to know whether it is better, for example, to pursue love, fame, wealth or contentment. There are, they claim, ‘Universal Truths’ which can be known and, once known, will guide our lives (thus making us wise). This is very definitely not an implication of the feminist critique which argues that there is a connection between knowledge and value.

I have included this section to help avoid confusion about what it is I am arguing for. In the previous chapter I argued against a position which holds that we can make knowledge claims about what is valuable. I do not mean to imply by this that value and knowledge are not connected in certain ways. The brief exploration of Longino’s work has been an attempt to show how values and knowledge are related, and how they are not. With this distinction hopefully clear, we can continue with the main business of this chapter, exploring the nature of values. I
will begin my exploration by looking at one of the most influential attempts to bring values-education into classrooms.

**IV.iv Values Clarification**

In their book *Values and Teaching*, Louis Raths, Merrill Harmin and Sid Simon (1966) explore a theory of values and a role it may play in education. The authors begin with the premise that values are a too often ignored domain that may help to explain behavioural problems in children. While research into emotional and intellectual causes is abundant, they claim no work had been done in connecting values and behaviour problems. This was the starting point of their project: “We have found that several kinds of problems children often exhibit in school and at home are profitably seen as being caused by values, or, more precisely, by a lack of values” (1966, p.4). They enthusiastically quote Einstein’s characterization of the modern age which leads to this lack: “A perfection of means and a confusion of goals” (1966, p.7). Given the freedom which modern society offers, children can no longer be sure of what values to hold or to commit to, and so end up in trouble. The authors list several different states that individuals unclear on values can fall into: “apathetic, flighty, uncertain, inconsistent, drifting, overconforming, overdissenters or poseurs” (1966, p.5-6). The hope in the values clarification project is that by helping students to clarify their own values, these negative characteristics can be overcome, or at least lessened.

An important problem that Raths and his colleagues brought to light was the burdens which accompany the (relatively enormous) freedom to create oneself. “What is to be done with one’s life and force? Once a question mainly for philosophers, in these times of increasing
complexity and change and abundance, it is a question that challenges almost all of us, although often we move through our lives unaware of it” (Raths et al., p.11). The authors were correct that this is a question that many people now have to deal with. Not only does the freedom for this follow from liberal democratic theory, it is also a result of social conditions (and an abundance of life’s necessities) prevailing in the later half of the twentieth century in North America. What motivated their project in 1966, and what motivates my project in 1999, is the belief that schools have an important role to play in helping to equip students with the tools necessary for answering this question.

Recognizing what (at least they perceive) the problem is, they turn to an analysis of values and values theory. The authors make an important distinction between values as something which one possesses, and a process of valuing. They claim that most of the research and study has been concerned with the former--looking to see, and quantify, what values people (claim to) hold. Their concern is with the more interesting questions of where and how people come to hold values.

Values, they argue, arise from experience. From our experiences we can develop certain guides which will influence our future behaviours. One way of talking about these guides is to call them values. The authors set-out seven criteria which must be fulfilled if a guide is to be considered a value: it must be 1) chosen freely, 2) chosen from among alternatives, 3) chosen after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative, 4) prized and cherished, 5) affirmed, 6) acted upon based on choices, and 7) repeated (1966, p.28-29).

Part of the problem with Raths’ project is the reverence which he seems to hold for values. If something needs to fulfill all seven of these criteria before it counts as a value, then
there will be many acts of choosing among alternatives that will not warrant the name of valuing. For example, if I choose to eat an apple instead of an orange, in most understandings I have made a value choice which regards the apple more highly than the orange (at this moment in time at least). However, it is entirely conceivable that the process which guided me in this decision does not fulfill the seven criteria as layed-out by Raths. Thus this guide is not a value and, it would seem to follow, that no process of valuing has thus gone on. Though his concern is supposedly with a process of valuing, by placing such restrictive conditions on what actually count as values, Raths misses out on a lot of valuing which happens. The way Raths speaks of values, one could infer that they are relatively rare. A more accurate understanding of values (and valuing) can be found in John Dewey's work:

Values of some sort or other are not traits of rare and festal occasions; they occur whenever any object is welcomed and lingered over; whenever it arouses aversion and protest; even though the lingering be but momentary and the aversion a passing glance toward something else (1925, p.400).

A similar sentiment can be found elsewhere in Dewey's work: "All conduct that is not simply either blindly impulsive or mechanically routine seems to involve valuations" (1939, p.3). Because Raths thinks of values as rare and elusive, he does not make the crucial distinction between immediate and real values. These are Deweyan terms which will be explicated in the next section. As we shall see, until a differentiation can be made between types of values (which Raths does not do), then no evaluation of values is likely.

The values clarification project has been criticized because it does not encourage students to question their own, or others', values. As a result, students are led to a position of relativism. Raths et al. seem to think that if only we can get clear about what values motivate our actions,
then we will lead good lives. However, this does not take into account values which will be harmful to us (or to others). Has a teacher been successful if she encourages a student to become clearer and more firmly committed to racist or sexist tendencies? Obviously not. However, this does not establish that the values clarification project is wrong, rather it shows that it is incomplete. It seems naive to think that simply by becoming clearer about our values we will ensure (or at least be helped toward) a good life. However, it is equally naive to think that schools can help contribute to students leading good lives without them critically evaluating, for themselves, their own values. If they are to evaluate critically their values, then they must be clear about what those values are. Thus the values clarification project outlined by Raths and others is a necessary first step, but it is not enough.

**IV. v Dewey**

Part of the problem in Raths, Harmin and Simon's project is their lack of clarity about what exactly values are. They do distinguish between a process of valuing and a value itself, but this still does not settle the question for us. For a more detailed exploration about what exactly a value is, we can look to John Dewey's work *Experience and Nature* (1925).

As he is wont to do, Dewey begins his exploration of value by dispelling what he sees as a misleading dualism. He argues that values, in themselves, are something that objects are qualified with. This banana is good, that pear is bad. Values are something which people attribute to objects (and, one would think, to beliefs, thoughts, states of affairs, actions, etc.). Where Dewey thinks we begin to go in error is when we look at values independent of the objects they adhere to. Dewey refers to this as a process whereby philosophers erect a "realm of
values" (1925, p.394). In creating this new metaphysical realm, philosophers then have the problem of explaining how the realm of values interacts with the realm of existence. If values exist independently of objects, we need to explain how they come to be associated with specific objects.

To avoid such problems, Dewey suggests we think of values not as an independent class of reality, but rather to look at the process of valuing and what motivates our valuing: “Of them as values there is accordingly nothing to be said; they are what they are. All that can be said of them concerns their generative conditions and the consequences to which they give rise” (1925, p.396). Dewey believes that there is nothing to be gained from studying values themselves. Instead he wants to focus on what motivates us to attribute value in a certain way and the consequences of so attributing value. In this way he argues “the important consideration and concern is not a theory of values but a theory of criticism” (1925, p.396).

For Dewey, criticism is essentially the practice of philosophy. When we seek to explore what is good or what has value, we are engaged in the practice of criticism: “judgement is...criticism wherever the subject-matter of discrimination concerns goods or values” (1925, p.398). The first thing to note about values then is that they are not constant. Dewey claims that values are not stable: “the things that possess them are exposed to all the contingencies of existence, and they are indifferent to our likings and tastes” (1925, p.399). We can change our mind about what is valuable. The interesting question thus becomes, how do we change our minds? What kinds of processes are at work that allow such an evolution of value commitments?

According to Dewey, we humans begin simply by reacting to pleasures, associating
values with pleasurable reactions. However, "it requires but brief time to teach that some things
sweet in the having are bitter in after-taste. Primitive innocence does not last. Enjoyment ceases
to be a datum and becomes a problem" (1925, p.398). As we mature, we are more able to deal
with the question of what is good. However, before addressing the question of how we come to
be more capable of evaluating values, we need to get clearer still on Dewey’s distinction between
different sorts of goods.

Once we move beyond simply reacting to the immediately pleasurable, we need to
distinguish between immediate goods and what Dewey refers to as “real” goods (1925, p.403).
The term “real” is taken up in the tradition of theorists who are referring to universal truths, those
values which by their perfection have greater reality. However, Dewey’s use is at least somewhat
ironic, as the quotation marks around “real” indicate. There is something beyond the immediate
good which we need pay attention to, but it does not need a special class of existence. Nor does
the term real imply (for Dewey) that such values are objective in any Platonic, metaphysical
sense. There must still be a subject, a valuer, who attributes value. However, the valuer in this
case seeks reasons why the good is a real one—if indeed it is. The valuer asks what are the
reasons why this immediate good is (or is not) actually good. And to consider reasons we need
to be aware of likely consequences. At this stage we move into the realm of criticism.

An example could help to clarify the distinction. Consider a young child who encounters
an entire bag of cookies. The child likes the taste of cookies and so eating them is an immediate
good, it is pleasurable. However, the consequence of eating an entire bag of cookies will likely
be that the child gets sick. This stomach-ache is not a “real” good (for most of us at least).

For Dewey, the initial fact that the cookies taste good is not interesting: “of immediate
values as such, values which occur and which are possessed and enjoyed, there is no theory at all; they just occur, are enjoyed, possessed; and that is all” (1925, p.403). Where values become interesting is when we start to consider the causes and consequences of our value evaluations.

Before we move to this analysis, let us stop and consider an implication of the previous paragraph. Dewey is arguing that no object, on its own, has any value. There is simply the immediate value that we, as valuers, attribute to it: “The conception that there are some objects or some properties of objects which carry their own adequate credentials [of value] upon their face is the snare and delusion of the whole historic tradition regarding knowledge” (1925, p.405). In other words, any theory of value which attempts to locate the source of value in an object, or to “see through” an object to the realm of value behind it, is wrong from the start. This is the position I was arguing in the last chapter against those who claim that we can make knowledge claims about what is valuable. Immediate value is essentially just a preference which we have for an object or a state of being. There are two points which need to be drawn from this.

The first is the potential tension highlighted earlier in the chapter regarding a regress problem. If there are no Universal Truths on which to build a foundation of values, what recourse do we have to question any values? Where does that chain stop? This is a question I will address later in this chapter. The second implication regards whether or not Dewey is correct in his assessment. While I tend to agree with Dewey that we have reason to be skeptical about the existence of such Universal Truths, I do not wish to go into this argument in this project. Instead, for the sake of this thesis, I am making the weaker claim that regardless of
whether such Universal Truths exist, schools in a liberal democracy have no right to instill\(^3\) any specific values (though to what extent we can teach for these values is another question, one which will be taken up in the next chapter). The reasoning for this is two-fold. First, by instilling specific values, we run the risk of violating the liberal democratic axiom that each must be free to choose for himself what goods to pursue.\(^4\) The second reason is that such Universal Truths are not open to critical evaluation and so, by instilling them, we are merely indoctrinating students (a practice which is both unethical and pedagogically undesirable). Thus whether or not Dewey is correct in assuming that no such Universal Truths exist is not relevant here. What is relevant is how, given that such Universal Truths cannot be appealed to to justify any beliefs or actions, we can understand what exactly values are and how they operate in our judgements.

This is where Dewey's theory of values (more appropriately, as he points out, a theory of criticism) is useful and revealing. That said, let us return to Dewey's exploration of values and

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3. By “instill” here I mean something like indoctrinate; getting the student, by whatever means, to adopt the value.

4. The reader might notice an apparent inconsistency here. I have argued that we cannot instill specific values. I have also argued that each must be free to choose for himself what goods to pursue in life. One might ask, however, how someone could be free to choose unless certain intellectual values have been instilled; for example, rules of valid inference, respect for evidence, impartiality and so forth? This problem will come up again later in my talk of autonomy (see page 60). If one is to choose a good life autonomously, then he needs both the capacity and disposition to think critically. But by instilling these critical thinking values, are we not violating his right to choose for himself what is a good life? What I have in mind is a situation in which an individual has both the capacity and disposition to think critically and so autonomously can choose what good life to pursue. However, the choice of that good life might involve a rejection of autonomy or critical thinking. How this might be done is questionable. The skills may atrophy from lack of use. But this lack of use is dependent upon their not being exercised and so one must, in some way, be able to suppress or shed the disposition to think critically. Whether it is likely in practice that one could divest oneself of a disposition is questionable. However, it is certainly logically possible and it is at this level that I want to leave this question.
how we move beyond immediate pleasures.

When we begin to move beyond immediate value, we begin to look for reasons to support this immediate preference. This is what Dewey is referring to when he speaks of “adequate credentials” (1925, p.405). When we read “credentials” as reasons to support a judgement, it is obvious why immediate values cannot carry their own adequate credentials; something cannot be used to establish itself as valuable. If I perceive object x to be valuable, I cannot appeal to object x exclusively to establish why. Instead, I need to look to some other object, state or situation which x gives rise to. An exception to this might be something which is done solely for the immediate pleasure of the act, eating chocolate for example. We might want to understand this act of eating as valuable because it gives rise to another state, namely pleasure. Conversely we might want to see the pleasure residing in the act itself. In this second case the immediate good is not the chocolate, but rather the pleasure it brings. In this way we might want to understand pleasure as an immediate good which needs no further credentials to establish it as valuable. Even if this second reading is preferable, we can see that most values will have (and require) some reasons to support their designation as real goods.

This language can appear confusing at first. When considering an object of immediate value, Dewey asks us to consider the causes (more accurately the reasons) why this object should be considered to also have real value. However, to justify the causes, we need look to the likely consequences of the object. Thus we are looking both ways from the object; back to its causes and forward to its consequences. In this way, there is no special realm of existence in which values reside. Rather, they can be understood only with reference to our everyday world of experience. This is what Dewey has in mind when he claims “Philosophic discourse...has no call
to create a world of "reality" *de novo*, nor to delve into secrets of Being hidden from common-sense and science" (1925, p.407). He continues, thus "philosophy has no private score of knowledge or of methods for attaining truth, so it has no private access to [The] good" (1925, p.408).

What philosophy does is take the knowledge made available through science and other forms of inquiry and use it to systematically critique what is good and valuable: "Its [philosophy’s] business is to accept and to utilize for a purpose the best available knowledge of its own time and place. And this purpose is criticism of beliefs, institutions, customs, policies with respect to their bearing upon good" (1925, p.408). In this way, Dewey explicates a conception of "wisdom which is not knowledge and which nevertheless cannot be without knowledge" (1925, p.409). Again, an example might help to clarify Dewey’s meaning here.

Consider a young woman, graduating from law school, trying to decide what sort of practice to set up. She is choosing between corporate law and environmental law. Corporate law, she thinks, will allow her a high degree of wealth and prestige. There is the likelihood of diverse work, a good chance of success and many other possible positives. In contrast, the environmental work will not be so lucrative nor prestigious. It may involve working at near impossible projects and the resulting frustrations. However, there are other rewards; helping to save the environment, working towards issues of justice, etc.

Knowledge enters into the scenario in the woman’s capacity to anticipate these likely consequences. However, to evaluate these consequences, one needs recourse to past experiences of identical or similar consequences to help judge whether or not they are desirable. In the absence of one’s own experience, one might look to similar experiences as observed in other
people's lives or in literature (or some other art-form). Our imagined character might know that
corporate law will likely make her wealthy, but this does not tell her whether or not wealth is a
good thing. To judge this, the woman would need to explore other experiences in which wealth
was a factor. Money is good in that it allows you to have the basic necessities of life and allows
you to pursue projects which you deem worthy. However money can also spoil you, it can distort
your sense of what is worth pursuing. Past experiences can help our young woman judge
whether or not wealth is something worth having and worth pursuing. In this way we can see
what Dewey means when he argues that knowledge is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of
wisdom.

Dewey's explanation of values makes sense, I think, as far as it goes. However, what is
left unstated in his explication is how we evaluate the past experiences. In our example above,
knowledge allowed the woman to anticipate that corporate law would likely bring wealth. She
then had recourse to her past experiences (or other similar experiences) to judge whether or not
wealth was a desirable thing. What needs fleshing-out in the Dewey scheme that I have outlined
is how this judgement is to be made. By what criteria are we to evaluate these past experiences?
This brings us back to the regress problem spoken of earlier in the chapter.

Iv.vi The Regress Problem Revisited

Recall that for Dewey, value is simply something we attribute to an object, (usually) for
some reason. However, if we need look for a reason for each value, we can never come to a first
value and so we would be trapped in an endless spiral of always having to justify our value
judgements. Dewey argues that nothing carries its own credentials of value (in other words,
nothing has inherent value). He also argues that for something to have a value, there needs to be a reason for it. Given these two criteria, it would appear we are trapped.

In what follows in this chapter, I will briefly outline three different ways in which people have attempted to resolve this paradox. I will begin where I left off, with John Dewey. I will then turn to Paul Taylor and his four-step process of justifying value judgements: “verification, validation, vindication and rational choice [of a way of life]” (1961, p.77). The third strategy will be to follow Jerrold Coombs' analysis of practical reasoning.

Iv.vi.a Dewey, Again

One way of resolving the regress problem is to look to some fundamental value commitments which are unshakeable. In his 1929 writing, The Construction of Good, Dewey ponders the tenability of such a foundationalist approach and where these ultimate value commitments could come from.

He begins by casting his glance backwards, to a time when most values were passed down from some religious authority (1929, p.290 ff.). In those relatively homogeneous societies, it was much easier for one central authority to dictate what was valuable. However, a number of changes have led us to the point that Raths talked about, where the question of what is a good life is one that we each, individually, need to grapple with (Raths et al. 1966, p.11).

Dewey draws an analogy between the state of values now and the state of knowledge before the Scientific Revolution (1929, p.293-5). At that point in history, knowledge was dictated by those in power. What was real, what was knowable, was determined not by observation of the world, but rather by a proclamation of someone in authority. The 'knowledge revolution' came about when "material of direct and uncontrolled experience was taken as
problematic; as supplying material to be transformed by reflective operations into known objects” (1929, p.293). The task that Dewey set, and that I want to take up, is to find a way to problematize values in the same way. The problem with much of the thinking that goes on surrounding values “is that it merely formulates and justifies the socially prevailing habit of regulation of these enjoyments [values]” (Dewey 1929, p.294). So even when values become the subject of inquiry, they are merely being ingrained. Many values-educators believe they ‘know’ what values are important and their pedagogical goal is merely to instill these values. More liberal educators, like Raths and his group, are primarily concerned with getting students to be clear about their values. Evaluation of these values, if it happens, is a minor, secondary goal. What Dewey saw as of prime importance was the need to see values as problematic and as needing evaluation.

In his 1939 work *Theory of Valuation*, Dewey offers a method of dealing with this regress problem. He argues that desire, of any sort, is an indication that something is problematic in one’s life; there is “want, lack, or privation which exists wherever there is desire...” (Dewey 1939, p.36). The state desired thus becomes a goal, a valued end which we can choose to try to fulfill or not. How we make this choice is the crux of the issue.

Dewey makes a distinction between what is desired (an empirical, descriptive matter) and what is desirable (a prescriptive matter):

The “desirable,” or the object which should be desired (valued), does not descend out of the a priori blue nor descend as an imperative from a moral Mount Sinai. It presents itself because past experience has shown that hasty action upon uncriticized desire leads to defeat and possibly to catastrophe. The “desirable” as distinct from the “desired” does not then designate something at large or a priori. It points to the difference between the operation and consequences of unexamined impulses and those of desires and interests that are the product of investigation of
I do not think that Dewey means to imply that an examined impulse will necessarily lead to something which is desirable. There is room for error and misjudgement. However, in examining and evaluating our desires, we at least give ourselves the possibility of correctly recognizing what is in fact desirable.

The question persists however, what is it that makes something desirable? For Dewey, it seems to involve some sort of harmonization of desires. When he speaks of uncriticized desires leading to defeat (1939, p.32), the defeat can be understood in terms of other desires that one has. Let us revisit our example of the young child who encounters an entire bag of cookies. One desire would be to eat the entire bag, because the cookies taste good. However, acting upon this desire would defeat other desires; avoiding stomach aches, remaining healthy (in terms of weight and diet), not overindulging certain treats which could diminish future enjoyment and any number of other negative impacts which such an action could bring about. Because acting on the first desire would defeat other, (likely) more important desires, it cannot reasonably be considered desirable. That such a young child might be unwilling to critically evaluate desires (or is incapable of so evaluating) only shows that such children need to be supervised.

For Dewey then, the regress is solved by finding an acceptable balance between one’s various (and sometimes competing) desires. In a final chapter of this 1939 work, entitled Conditions of Social Theory, Dewey writes of this process of critical evaluation in terms of one’s place in a community: “improved valuation must grow out of existing valuations, subjected to critical methods of investigation” (1939, p.60). There is suggestion that this harmonization need take place not merely within one’s own web of desires, but also with those desires possessed by
other members' of one's community. This is obviously true of desires which have moral implications. It is not clear to me if Dewey thinks such harmonization between people needs to also take place in realms where morality does not demand we act in one way or another, but this is not crucial for our inquiry.

Iv.vi.b Taylor

Another attempt to resolve the regress problem can be found in Paul Taylor's 1961 book *Normative Discourse*. In this book, Taylor attempts to construct a rational system wherein all value judgements can be justified and verified.

The process is an attempt to justify one's value judgements (Taylor talks about a process of justifying a value judgement which has already been made, but I can see no reason why the process cannot be reversed and applied to a pending judgement). To justify a judgement is simply to provide a reason (or reasons) why the judgement is a good one. The central question which guides Taylor's project is this: "[w]hat sorts of reasons are good reasons in justifying value judgments?" (1961, p.76). The process is best described in the author's own words:

We *verify* value judgments by appeal either to standards or to rules which we have adopted. We *validate* standards or rules (i.e., we justify our adopting certain standards or rules) by appeal to higher standards or rules. The adoption of standards or rules which themselves cannot be validated by appeal to any higher standards or rules results from our decision to accept a whole value system. We *vindicate* our accepting a whole value system by appeal to the way of life to which we are committed. Our commitment to a way of life can be justified in terms of a *rational choice* among different ways of life (1961, p.77).

It might appear at first glance that Taylor is simply slapping fancy labels on the process of giving reasons for our value judgements. The fact that each step has a name does not extricate Taylor from the regress problem. For our concerns here then we need to look at the final stage of his
explication, the rational choice of a way of life.

On the surface, Taylor's four-step process seems to end in something like the foundationalist position that I spoke of earlier that Dewey rejected. That is, there are some fundamental principles from which all other values judgements are justified. Taylor has recognized that his process can never give full justification for a judgement: “[w]e can only say that these simply are the principles to which we subscribe in virtue of the fact that we are committed to a particular way of life” (1961, p.156). Taylor continues: “[w]e cannot give reasons for claiming that V is relevant to S or that V takes precedence over V’. We can only say we have chosen that way life. Such a choice is our ultimate normative commitment” (1961, p.156). Taylor thinks that this is not problematic because this way of life is rationally chosen (in other words, there are reasons to support the choice).

Without getting into too much detail, we can see a problem with this simply by looking at the conditions which Taylor puts on the rational choice of a way of life. Taylor claims that a choice is rational “to the extent that it is free, enlightened, and impartial” (1961, p.164-65). The first two conditions make sense as they deal with autonomous choice and choice based on a knowledge of alternatives. However the third condition is very puzzling. Taylor lays out three sub-criteria which encompass the notion of impartiality: 1) the choice is disinterested, 2) the choice is detached or objective and 3) the choice is unbiased (1961, p.170-72). If these three are fulfilled, what room is there for any personal taste in value judgements? Taylor is right in arguing that taste is different from values in that the latter have reasons which justify them. However, there must be something personal in what we understand values to be. As Dewey pointed out, desires are the beginning of value judgements in that they point to an end which one
wants to bring about. It does not make sense to think of desires as being wholly disinterested, detached and unbiased. I desire something because I want it, not some disinterested, wholly rational third party.

The criterion of impartiality, Taylor might want to argue, is not meant to bear upon value judgements themselves but rather on the adoption of a way of life. But the choice of a way of life is itself a value judgement. In choosing a way of life, I am deciding (for myself) that this way of life, x, has more value than those ways of life, a, b or c. Taylor is correct, I think, that the choice of a way of life can be made in a rational manner. That is, we can compare reasons for accepting one life over another. However if Taylor’s scheme is to be successful, he needs to establish that somehow the adoption of a way of life necessarily falls out from some set of reasons. Only in this way could the regress problem be solved once and for all. But as we shall see in the next section, reasons themselves need some further element (some want or desire) if they are to be considered good reasons (that is, reasons which will motivate us to act).

Taylor’s scheme is useful in many respects. He helps to clarify some of the steps involved in evaluating value judgements. However, he fails to take into account that peoples’ motivations and desires are never perfectly rational and so cannot be accurately captured by his process. Thus, I want to claim that Taylor has not been entirely successful in avoiding the regress problem.

Iv.vi.c Coombs and Practical Rationality

A third option which may help us resolve the regress problem is practical reasoning. Recall from chapter 3 John Kekes’ analysis of practical wisdom. There he claimed that practical wisdom is concerned only with means to ends, not with the specific ends themselves. As such,
he thought the approach very deficient.

However, many theorists who write about practical reasoning do think that it has a lot to say about helping us to evaluate which ends have worth, not merely how to achieve any given end. I realize there is a slippage here between the practical wisdom of Kekes and the practical rationality which here follows; this is a relationship I will explore below.

In his 1986 presidential address to the Philosophy of Education Society, Jerrold Coombs outlines a theory of practical rationality (which he later termed practical reasoning; see, for example, Coombs 1997). He questions the notion that “value claims cannot be rationally grounded; and if they cannot, how can educators be justified in imparting values?” (1986, p.1). Coombs wants to establish that somehow “reasoning can give rise to commitment which, other things being equal, motivates action” (p.5). This is in response to arguments against practical rationality which assert that reasons have no motivating force, but rather combine with values to induce action.

In place of the combination between reasons and values, Coombs argues for a relationship between wants (under which he lumps “desires, interests, appreciations, preferences, appetites, ideals and principles” (p.7)) and facts. Coombs writes:

Facts about an action motivate when considered by the agent because they pick out some feature of the action that is wanted by the agent, or they activate a disposition such as the disposition to empathize with another and thus to perform the action which would fulfill the wants of the other (p.7).

Coombs then goes on to question “what is to count as rational consideration of a fact” (p.7). Here he gets into a discussion of the kinds of capacities and dispositions which make for a good practical reasoner.
Where Coombs' account might run into trouble is when he puts a condition on the choice that it must be made in light of some life plan: "the notion of rational consideration of reasons requires...that we conceive of the agent as more than a mere collection of preferences at a particular point in time. An agent exists through a period of time and has a life plan, i.e., some more or less clear idea of the sort of life she prefers on the whole" (p.10). Coombs, following Taylor's lead, believes that this life plan can be conceived under more or less rational conditions. However, notice this discrepancy between the two. Recall that for Coombs reasons (which are to have motivating force) are a combination of facts (in this case, various possible ways of living in the world) and wants. However, for Taylor, wants can have no part in the rational choice of a way of life because they would violate the criterion of impartiality. Because wants must play some role in the choice of a way of life, that choice cannot be wholly rational (by which I mean that all aspects of the choice cannot be justified with reference to external, objective standards). Though we have gone a long way in overcoming the regress problem, we seem to have not escaped it entirely.

However, I do think Coombs is right to point out that the choice is made under "conditions which more or less approximate the conditions of rational choice" (1986, p.10). It cannot be ideally rational as Taylor would like (1961, p.127). However, we can be as rational as possible in considering what ways of life would be desirable.

I noticed earlier that there was a slippage between my uses of practical reasoning and practical wisdom. While not certain about the difference, I want to suggest that an answer might be found in this notion of a life's plan. A good practical reasoner will be able to make means-ends connections and will also be able to evaluate ends in terms of their worth. However such
evaluation will always be done relative to this choice of a way of life. Someone with practical wisdom, I want to claim, is a good practical reasoner who has chosen a good way of life.

The application of good practical reasoning can allow someone to choose a good way of life. In this way the practical reasoner becomes (practically) wise. This, in a nut-shell, is the process that I would like to see students taught. This is the path to wisdom that I am proposing.

I want to be careful here and not give the impression that I have the criteria by which we are to evaluate what is a good way of life. Just as I am not trying to argue in this thesis what exactly wisdom consists of, so I am not arguing that I know what a good way of life is. In evaluating whether or not some person is wise, we need to debate not merely what characteristics that person possesses, but further what characteristics a wise person would have. So too in evaluating what a good way of life would be.

IV.ii Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the nature of values and how they have been conceived by various theorists. According to my project of teaching within a liberal democratic state, I have developed a rough conception of value which loosely follows John Dewey's. I have argued that values are not metaphysically objective in the way that many thinkers claim, but are rather something which, individually, we attribute to objects (or states of being, experiences, emotions, etc.). I have looked at the values clarification project of Louis Raths et al. who make the key distinction between values and valuing. However, I argued that their project is severely limited in that it does not stress the evaluation of the worth of our values, but merely asks us to be clear about those values. I thus turned to John Dewey whose picture of values and valuing is insightful. I conclude with the question of how we might go about overcoming the regress
problem. I have suggested three possible courses of action, following on the works of John Dewey, Paul Taylor and Jerrold Coombs.

To this point, I have talked about values only in a general way. In the next chapter, I want to look more closely at specific values and question whether or not there are any which schools should try to teach for. Given the liberal democratic context under which I am operating in this paper, I have suggested that there are no values that schools can attempt to instill because each individual must be free to make up his or her mind as to what constitutes a good life. However, we can question whether or not, even within such a liberal democratic framework, there are values which can properly be seen as essential to a good life or essential to the success of the democracy itself. Thus, we turn our attention more directly to the world of morals.
Chapter V: Wisdom and Morality

V.i Introduction

The previous chapter looked at the relationship between wisdom and value judgements. With this chapter I shall look specifically to one type of value judgement: moral.

There are two strands of thought which will guide this discussion. First, following from the previous chapter, I will inquire whether there are any value commitments that schools can or must attempt to foster in students. Asked another way, are there any value commitments that are necessary conditions for a good life? It may well be the case that such necessary commitments are not moral ones. However, for reasons which I will explain in a moment, I lump this section in with the morality chapter anyway.

The second strand of thinking is designed to round-out the picture of my conception of wisdom. Here, I will ask whether or not wisdom and morality are the same thing. In order to get at this issue, I will address two related questions. Can we be wise without being moral? Can we be moral without being wise?

What exactly is morality? This is not a simple question to answer. However, I shall offer, merely as a working hypothesis, a rather simplified conception. Moral value judgements, like aesthetic, prudential and intellectual value judgements, are judgements for which reasons can be given. Morality differs from these other realms in the consequences of the judgement. We can judge objects in these other realms to be good or bad. That is a good painting but this is a bad one. That is a smart way to fulfill your goals, but this is a foolish way. With moral judgements we see the discussion shifting from good and bad to right and wrong. Moral judgements involve how persons (and perhaps other agents) ought to be treated. The result of
this can be an obligation to act in a certain way, or to refrain from acting. There is also, generally, an aspect of universalization with moral judgements. If I think cubism is a bad style of painting, it does not follow that I hold that others should not be cubists, nor that others should not enjoy cubism. In contrast, if I think stealing is wrong, I do hold that others should not steal.

The word ‘should’ here captures the essence of moral judgements. It implies not only the obligations (to act or to refrain from an act) which accompany many moral judgements, but it also signifies a universality of moral principles. If I judge something to be morally wrong in a given situation, then in all relevantly similar circumstances, I must also judge it to be wrong. This distinction will get drawn on later in this chapter. While this is still a rather vague characterization of morality, it gives us a sufficient flavour of the types of concerns captured by the term moral.

This returns us to the discussion of why I have lumped together morality and the value commitments which some argue are necessary to a good life. If something can be established as a necessary component of a good life, then we can say it should be a part of all lives. This universalization, and the presence of this ‘should’, suggest a close connection with morality. For example, some might argue that without love, it is impossible to lead a good life. If this could be established, then we could establish that we should have love in our lives. Yet for some, love is a distinctly non-moral word (because feelings are beyond our control, we cannot have an obligation to feel a certain way and so, have no obligation to love another). However, for my purposes here, the relationship is close enough that I feel comfortable talking of the two together. It may be the case that not all of the value commitments which will be suggested as necessary for a good life are moral principles. With that proviso in mind, let us turn our attention to some
V.ii Necessary Values

I will begin this discussion by piecing together some threads from previous chapters which will help to set the problem. Following from Dewey’s theory of values, I have argued that values are not metaphysically objective. They do not adhere in an object, nor do they exist in some special sphere of reality. Values are simply qualities which individuals attribute to objects (or states of being). The second thread which needs picking up involves the ‘good life’ in a liberal democratic society. I have claimed that one of the fundamental principles of a liberal democracy is that each individual must be allowed to choose for herself what will constitute a good life. What we decide a good life to be is implicit in the value commitments we hold. Thus, it would appear that an education in a liberal democratic society could not attempt to foster any specific value commitments. However, some theorists have tried to argue that there are some value commitments which are so fundamental to a good life, that without them there is no chance of living a good life. Given this, they would argue that schools do have a right (and likely a responsibility) to attempt to instill such commitments.

One example of this kind of thinking can be found in Ronald Dworkin’s lecture Foundations of Liberal Equality (1990). In this talk, Dworkin makes the distinction between volitional and critical interests (or well-being). Volitional interests are essentially just preferences. Dworkin gives the example of sailing. It is an activity that he enjoys and wants to do well. However, if he does not sail well, or does not get the opportunity to sail, his life is not much the worse for it. In contrast, critical well-being has to do with what one “should want, that
is, the achievements or experiences that it would make his life a worse one not to want” (1990, p.43). Dworkin’s example of a critical interest is his closeness with his children. A lack of such closeness, he claims, would make his life considerably worse. Dworkin does realize that there will be interplay between the two types of interests. It is important to do well in the things one wants to do and it is important to want the things one feels one must do. However, even though this interplay exists, the reasoning behind the two types of interests differs:

It is important for me to sail well because I want to sail well, not vice versa. [However] I do not think that having a close relationship with my children is important just because I happen to want it; on the contrary, I want it because I believe a life without such relationships is a worse one (1990, p.44).

While Dworkin’s distinction between the two types of interests is a useful one, it remains problematically ambiguous. Is Dworkin arguing that such critical interests are ones that everyone should want? Or is he merely claiming that they are ones which are particularly special to him? It is hard to imagine, with the example he gives, that the first interpretation is very plausible. Dworkin cannot be arguing that everyone should want to have close relations with their children, for this would imply that everyone should want to have children.

Perhaps this is simply a poor example of what he means by a critical interest. Regardless, I offer Dworkin’s analysis only as an example of how someone might argue that certain values are essential to a good life and so should be taught in schools. There is a second form of this argument which is both more plausible and more relevant to the project at hand.

Aside from claiming that certain values are necessary to a good life, another attempt to argue something like Dworkin’s position is to argue that the values are to be taught because they are necessary for the success of a functioning democracy. Such arguments claim that the
responsibility of the education system in a democracy is to bring the students to a point where they can function as citizens within a democracy. If it can be shown that certain value commitments are necessary for a functioning democracy, then schools have a right to instill them.

Such an argument can be found in the writings of R.S. Peters. In his essay *Concrete Principles and the Rational Passions* (1970), Peters argues that "there are a limited number of principles which are fundamental but non-arbitrary in the sense that they are presuppositions of the form of discourse in which the question 'What are there reasons for doing?' is asked seriously" (1970, p.286). The principles which Peters lists are "impartiality, the consideration of interests, freedom, respect for persons, and probably truth-telling" (1970, p.286). Peters argues that these "principles are presuppositions of what is called the democratic way of life" (1970, p.286). The kinds of discourses which are necessary for a democracy to function depend upon these principles. Therefore it is necessary that the individuals who comprise the democracy have a commitment to these principles and the capacities needed to make that commitment meaningful. According to Peters, one of the tasks of education is to develop in students these principles.

A similar argument is made by Peters in his book *Ethics and Education* (1966). Here Peters talks about the "school's part in training citizens in the skills and attitudes appropriate for membership in a democratic community" (1966, p.291). He goes on to write:

Any school in a democratic society must therefore consider realistically what it can do to develop democratically minded citizens. The character of such citizens was outlined in Section 2 of this chapter, where it was explained how the democratic way of life, with its emphasis on discussion and the use of reason, developed out of practices which were gradually established (1966, p.312).
Here again Peters is suggesting that certain types of principles must be instilled in students if the democracy is to function.

On the surface, Peters' arguments seem to be in conflict with mine. He is proposing that certain principles (which can be understood as value commitments) can and must be taught in schools. This seems to contradict the axiom that each must be free to choose for himself what goods in life to pursue. There is, however, a way of accommodating Peters' arguments within my project. To see how, we can look to a second example of this argument from democracy.

On one level, Eamonn Callan's *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (1997) is making an argument very similar to Peters'. Callan's project is, in part, to determine what virtues a citizen would need to effectively be a member of a liberal democratic society. He cites certain intellectual virtues which are similar to Peters' list of principles, as well as patriotism. While Callan agrees that we should teach for these virtues, he introduces a distinction which is crucial to our discussion. This distinction is best brought out in his discussion of autonomy (see 1997, chapters 6 and 7). Callan argues that while we must have the capacity to act autonomously if we are to freely and meaningfully choose what is a good life, autonomy is not necessarily a constituent of a good life.

Callan imagines various lives which someone could reasonably consider to constitute a good life which simply do not involve autonomy. For example, some might consider a life of religious devotion and servitude the best possible life. This might not involve any (real) exercise of autonomy. Once Callan establishes at least one such possibility, he can conclude that autonomy is not a necessary condition of a good life. Therefore, he argues that schools have no right to teach that autonomy is necessary for a good life. However, Callan is also very aware of
the democratic principle that each must be free to choose for himself what is a good life. This would seem to require at least the capacity for autonomy. While there appears to be a paradox here, there is not.

It is possible to teach the capacities necessary for autonomy without teaching that autonomy is necessarily a good thing. Consider a simplified, but related analogy. Many teachers help students to develop the capacity to read. It is a different thing for a teacher to try to convince a student that reading is a necessary part of a good life (though I'm sure we've all had teachers who have attempted this). The ideal outcome of a democratic education is a student who has the capacity to read and the disposition to decide for herself whether or not reading is a good thing. So too is the ideal regarding autonomy or any other of what might be considered “the democratic virtues” (see the note on page 40 for further discussion).

Another distinction which Callan makes in his book can help us to understand how his position is different from Peters'. In talking about comprehensive doctrines, Callan separates out those which must be incorporated within the overlapping consensus and those which need merely be tolerated (1997, p.22). Callan’s criterion for this separation is what he calls reasonableness. Racism is something he cites as being unreasonable (by which I understand him to mean that

5. The terms comprehensive doctrine and overlapping consensus are ones that Callan borrow from Rawls. A comprehensive doctrine is an interrelated set of values which guides one’s life. To accommodate reasonable pluralism, Rawls argued that all such comprehensive doctrines which are reasonable need to be respected within the fundamental structure of a society. There is thus a pool of values (representing the various reasonable comprehensive doctrines) which all must be respected within the basic structure of a society if that society is to be just. This pool of values is the overlapping consensus. While I may not agree with someone else’s doctrines, if I judge them to be reasonable, I agree that they should find a place in the structure of the society. The reasonable values of different people overlap and there is consensus that all such overlapping values will be respected in the basic institutions of the society.
racism is inconsistent with basic democratic principles of equality). Because it is unreasonable, we do not need to accommodate the racist's views in organizing the basic institutions of society. However, this does not give us the right to prevent him from acting on his racism (provided, of course, he is within the scope of the law).

If this toleration is to be at all meaningful, we cannot have an education system which prevents, at all costs, these unreasonable doctrines from emerging. Let us consider one example from Peters' list, respect for persons. We probably have good reason to believe that a democracy can only function if its citizens have a certain respect for each other. Thus we can teach what this respect might entail and we can give students reasons why respect for other persons is a good thing. We cannot, however, force students to have a commitment to this respect. If a student does not accept our reasons as good (enough) ones, we have no recourse. Just as the racist must be tolerated, so too must we tolerate someone who chooses to not respect other persons. To deny this possibility (through coercion, intimidation, public ridicule, indoctrination or any other method), is to interfere with that individual's right to choose for himself what a good life is.

Some theorists have argued that we can ethically attempt to foster in students certain values. To an extent I agree with this. However, I have argued that there are certain dangers involved in this process which need to be considered. Schools have the right to demand adherence to certain moral principles by their students. However, they have no right to demand of the students that they incorporate these principles within their conception of a good life. Schools may have rules requiring that students are honest and they may punish those students who are not honest. They cannot, however, demand that students have a basic value commitment to honesty. Nor can they teach in a way which attempts to indoctrinate students into such a value
commitment.

Some might want to argue that we are only restricted in teaching for certain values by ethical considerations, such as indoctrination. While such considerations are obviously important, I want to claim that they are not the only relevant ones. If Callan’s talk of toleration is to be at all meaningful, then we must allow some room for students to make value choices with which we disagree. If we imagine a spectrum ranging from morally acceptable teaching (giving reasons, getting students to evaluate reasons and so forth) to indoctrination, I think we are bound not simply by the need to avoid indoctrination. If we really want citizens to choose for themselves what goods to pursue in life, then persons, as students, must be given some freedom to explore (what many would consider) undesirable values. The question of just how much freedom to offer is not one which I will take up at this point, but which I raise as an important consideration.

V.iii Wisdom and Morality: Their Connection

For much of the past 1500 years, many thinkers have attempted to equate wisdom with morality. For the ancient Greeks, wisdom had to do with knowledge of things eternal. The Stoics expanded this notion to include knowledge of both eternal and human things. During the Middle-Ages, the concept of wisdom shifted from being merely a type of knowledge to being a possession of virtue. Thinkers like Seneca and Cicero came to see wisdom as a moral rather than an intellectual virtue, associating it with prudence. With thinkers such as Alexander of Hales, we see early signs of the modern distinction between being learned and being wise. For Alexander, the learned man knows what is good, the wise man loves and does what is good (Rice 1958, 1-
In the rest of this chapter I will explore this belief that morality and wisdom are two names for the same thing.

There are two questions which will guide my investigation of this identity claim. First, can one be wise without being moral? Second, can one be moral without being wise? To each formulation of the question, there is a shallow and deeper way of approaching the issue. The shallow formulations are easy to refute, the deeper ones not so easy.

The second question is easier to deal with and so I will begin there. If by moral judgement we understand some judgement based upon principles regarding how we ought to treat others, then it is clear that we can be moral without being wise. For wisdom, as I am talking about it, is something wide-ranging. It has to do with our basic value commitments and leading a life in accordance with these values. To be morally good in one instance does not imply that we will be so in other situations. Thus one instance of acting in a morally appropriate way does not necessarily entail wisdom.

The deeper reading of this question will ask if I act in morally appropriate ways in all (or at least most) instances, is this necessarily an indication that I am wise? To answer this, we must be clearer about exactly what we mean by acting morally appropriately. In other words, we must be more exact about what morality is. However, in answering the first question, we can get clearer about a possible answer to this second one.

The first question asks whether one can be wise without being moral. The simple answer says yes and appeals to the wide-range of types of value-judgements which can be involved in wisdom. In other words, there are non-moral realms on which wisdom can come to bear and so morality has no place in such judgements. An example might be of a young woman choosing a
career in either law or literature. Under most circumstances, we can see that this is simply not a moral issue. That is, both pursuits could reasonably be followed without any moral injunction against them (they both could be considered morally permissible). However, it is a judgement in which wisdom can have a large impact. Consider a scenario in which the woman is choosing between the two based on the following relevant factors. Literature is something she loves, something she has a passion for. Further, it is a pursuit which will satisfy not only her professional goals, but be consistent with a life-style she favours. On the flip side, she is considering law simply because her mother was a lawyer. In such a case, wisdom (not to mention common sense) would have the woman choose the literary pursuits (I am assuming, of course, that the woman values all the factors surrounding literature more deeply than she values following in her mother's footsteps; though notice, it is conceivable that the reverse could be true and so wisdom might dictate that she become a lawyer). In choosing literature, the woman chooses well in light of what is valuable, and so (according to my definition) is wise. Here then is a case of being wise, without being moral.

Two objections immediately surface regarding this scenario. One might claim that in the absence of any morally relevant considerations, any behaviour is morally acceptable and so the woman is being moral. While there may be some truth to this, this is a rather indirect way of speaking about morality. In the absence of any judgement based upon moral principles, any principle testing of any sort, in the absence of any activity we normally associate with moral deliberation, I want to deny that any significant moral work is being done in this scenario. Without such work, it makes little sense to speak of morality in this scenario except as a neutral observer.
I am claiming that this is a morally neutral act. For those who do not accept this refutation, they will want to contrast a moral act with an immoral one. Regardless of which is the better labeling of the imagined scenario, we can see how the relevant question becomes whether or not one can be wise and immoral at the same time. We will get to this question soon, but first, we must look to the second objection to the scenario I have outlined.

The second objection is similar to one I outlined earlier. My rejection of the one instance of morality being a sign of wisdom was based on the fact that wisdom extends over a wide range of considerations. Could not a similar charge be brought to bear here? In other words, would not a truly wise person have to be wise in not merely non-moral realms, but in the moral sphere as well? Here, I think, is the crux of the identity question.

The two processes certainly bear some resemblance. To be wise (at least according to my conception of wisdom), we need to make judgements based upon some principles (what I have been calling value commitments) which we believe will lead to a good life. To be moral, we need to make some judgements based upon what we consider appropriate ways of acting towards other living (and perhaps non-living) things. The question thus revolves around the relationship between the principles which will allow one to lead a good life and the principles which are considered appropriate to guide action. Are the two the same?

One reason to think not is that in making a judgement about the first type of principle, I do not imply that others should make the same judgements. In other words, what I consider to have worth does not imply that I expect others to find the same things to have worth. A good life

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6. Notice that this process does not guarantee wisdom. We, as observers, can still make judgements about where or not the choices the person has made do in fact lead to a good life.
to me may entail maximizing autonomy, thinking for myself whenever possible. However, someone else might think that a good life involves total subservience to a religious authority. I may not agree that such subservience would constitute a good life, but I do not, therefore, think that the other person should change his mind. This is the crux of what Rawls calls reasonable pluralism. In contrast though, what I judge as a morally important principle, I also expect others to find so. For example, if I think the unjustified killing of another human being is wrong, I think so not just for myself, but for all people in all similar circumstances. For a moral principle to have any weight, it must be universalizable in this sense. To sum up, if you make a wisdom-judgement that differs from mine, there is no conflict. However, if you make a moral judgement which is different from mine, then there is a conflict. For this reason, we have reason to at least suspect that wisdom and morality are not equivalent.

While this difference is legitimate and important, it does not settle the question decisively. In response, someone might propose that while there is a range of possibilities in terms of wisdom-guiding principles, this range is a limited one. While there is a huge range of such possible principles, it might be the case that they are limited by certain moral considerations. For example, to act with complete disregard for the interests of others might not be an acceptable wisdom-guiding principle because it is a morally unacceptable one.

Whether or not this response carries any weight depends upon whether we consider morality to be strictly a private thing, or if it is in some way a communal judgement. By communal judgement I mean some agreement on a set of rules which will guide us in our moral lives. In contrast, a private morality would be one where each individual decides for herself what moral principles should guide conduct. In reality, both of these approaches are probably
combined by individuals trying to create a moral system. However, for the sake of this analysis, I will consider the two separately.

Which is the better understanding of morality is not something I am concerned with here. Instead, I merely want to outline both interpretations and show how they would lead to different answers regarding the question of whether or not morality and wisdom are the same thing. I will begin by looking at the understanding of morality which holds that the principles are, in some way, at least communally constructed.

One way of understanding how moral principles might be communally constructed is to follow Rawls’ discussion of reasonable pluralism (see, for example, 1993, p.63 ff.). Rawls argues that any reasonable doctrine must be accommodated within the basic political structure of a state. He uses the term ‘over-lapping’ consensus to capture the essence of this. What I want to suggest is that moral principles might be created in a similar fashion. Moral principles are only valid if they do not contradict any reasonable doctrine that a citizen might hold. This in turn questions the type of reason which can be used to justify a moral principle. This talk is, admittedly, vague. Let us consider an example of how this might play out.

Consider a Christian who interprets the Bible to read that homosexuality is wrong. Because he believes that to live a good life he needs to follow the teachings of the Bible, tolerance of homosexuality would not be something he would value. However, in addition to being a Christian, the man also recognizes himself as a citizen in a democratic society. He realizes that while the Bible is an adequate authority to support his views of a good life, it may not be an authority that other reasonable people will accept. Thus he recognizes principles dictated from Scripture are not appropriate ones to use in creating a set of moral principles (recall
that within this scenario, we are assuming morality is strictly public). Let us imagine that a society does agree that toleration of diverse sexual orientations is the morally appropriate position. Where does this leave our imagined Christian?

If he follows the moral dictates of his society and is tolerant of homosexuality, he will be acting unwisely (according to his wisdom principles). Conversely, if he acts in a way he considers to be wise, he will be acting immorally. While we seem to have found a scenario in which one might be wise and immoral at the same time, I am not sure how many people would be convinced that such a scenario is at all plausible. Can we imagine that someone would accept moral principles that he thinks lead to a bad life? It does not seem likely to me.

The situation is very different if we consider our basic moral principles to be self-generated. These principles will be accepted based upon reasoned dialogue with others in society. Further, one’s commitments will be subject to the scrutiny and possible censure of other people. However, even taking into account these two points, the principles are ones that must be accepted or rejected by each individual person. In this scenario, I can consider an act morally appropriate even though the rest of my society disagrees.

If this is the more accurate understanding of morality, then it is very difficult to imagine someone acting both wisely and immorally. It does not seem possible that a sane, rational person would conceive of a good life that she believes is also immoral. A life which differs on these points would be fragmented beyond the bounds of comprehension.

V.IV Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored two central points. First, I explored the position that there are basic value commitments which we should attempt to foster in all students (based either upon
a general conception of what is necessary for a good life, or upon what is considered necessary for the functioning of a democracy). I accepted that there could be reasons why such teaching might be appropriate. However, I also offered a warning that there is danger in teaching specific values. We need to be aware not only of issues of indoctrination, but also of giving students the freedom to explore what might be considered undesirable values. If the liberal democratic axiom that each must decide for himself what a good life is is to be meaningful, then students must be in a position to decide for themselves what goods to pursue in life.

I then looked more closely at the connection between morality and wisdom. Many thinkers have assumed the two are the same thing. While not resolving this issue, I argued that the connection depends upon how one understands what morality is. If morality is thought to be a communally decided upon set of principles, then it is conceivable (though not likely) that one could be both wise and immoral. If morality is a set of principles which one decides for oneself, then it is next to impossible to see how one could be wise and immoral at the same time.

To conclude this discussion, I want to look a bit more closely at why we might think that wisdom and morality are so closely linked. This in turn will pick up a number of threads of previous discussions and give us a better understanding of my conception of wisdom.

Recall from chapter 4, Dewey’s distinction between immediate and real goods. Immediate goods are what we find pleasurable. Real goods are goods which have reasons to support them. A question which emerges is whether or not all immediate goods can be real goods? In other words are there always going to be reasons to support a certain preference?

Consider this example: is it better to scratch my nose with my left hand or right? An appropriate response to this question: who cares! And this is precisely the point. Sometimes
there are value judgements we make that simply do not impact our lives in any significant way. Assuming I can get an equally good scratch from both left and right hand (and there are no cultural taboos against one or the other), there can be no reasons to support the preference of one over another.

In terms of my wisdom project, judging well about what is valuable in these circumstances will not let us lead better lives. For a value judgement to have any bearing on my wisdom quotient, it needs to impact on my life in some important way. This can be seen with a less trivial example. I am quite fond of the paintings of Emily Carr. Are there reasons which would make this immediate good into a real good? I can talk of her use of colour, the way she captures something of the west-coast environment and any number of other factors. However, these are not reasons which everyone would accept. More importantly, the fact that I value Emily Carr’s paintings does not make my life significantly better. Aesthetic pursuits and the appreciation of aesthetic compositions can be very important to me, and make my life richer in any number of ways. However, the fact that I value Emily Carr’s paintings over, say, Pablo Picasso’s, does not make my life better. In this example I am comparing only the aesthetic qualities of the two painters. It may be the case that there are moral problems with one artist or art-form which would be detrimental to how I live my life. In such a case the choice of one artist or art-form would bear significantly on my wisdom quotient (but this is for moral reasons, not

7. My argument here avoids what many consider to be a crucial question about life quality. While there may not be much difference in a preference for Emily Carr over Pablo Picasso, what of a preference for the Spice Girls over Beethoven? Many want to argue that an appreciation of Beethoven’s music does lead to a far richer life than would an appreciation for the Spice Girls. Accepting that more needs to be said on this argument, I want to leave it merely as an open question for now.
aesthetic ones).

In contrast to aesthetic valuations, moral valuations do impact my life greatly. Whether it is a condition of human nature or merely a fact of our society, most of us do tie together very closely moral judgements with judgements about the quality of our life. That is why it was so hard to imagine a scenario in which one could be wise but immoral. The concepts themselves are separate. But, whether by nature, conditioning or choice, the two are linked by a very strong bond.

Wisdom, as I outline it, is judging well about what is valuable. There will be instances of evaluation which impact very minimally on our lives and so will not contribute very much to our wisdom. There will be other instances which speak very directly and strongly to the quality of our lives. In these cases the quality of our judgements about what is valuable will go a long way in determining how wise we are. It just so happens that moral judgements tend to be of the later sort.
Chapter VI: Conclusion

VI.i Introduction

In this thesis I have been developing a conception of wisdom which would be an appropriate goal of educational systems within liberal democratic states. I have defined wisdom as judging well about what is valuable. The educational goal in teaching for wisdom is to give students the capacities and dispositions necessary for recognizing their value choices and deciding whether or not they are good ones. Such a teaching will not guarantee that students will become wise. However, it could give them a good start towards wisdom.

With this final chapter, I want to make some initial attempts at defending this conception of wisdom. In the introductory chapter, I laid out four criteria by which I would measure the success of this conception: 1) it must be consistent with other goals of an educational system in a liberal democratic state; 2) it must be at least reasonably close to our everyday usage of the term wisdom; 3) where it differs from our common understanding of the term, I will need to be able to provide good reasons why this difference is acceptable; and 4) most crucially, it must have some value; that is, the conception must be useful in some way, it must contribute something important to the educational project. I will examine each of these criteria in turn and see how well my conception of wisdom measures up.

VI.ii Wisdom and Schools

Wisdom, as I have outlined it, is judging well about what is valuable in life. What is in fact valuable is not something we can be told, nor I doubt, something we can know. Rather, we must make value choices based upon consideration of reasons which we believe will lead us
towards what we consider to be a good life. If in fact these choices (and the principles/values we use to justify them) allow us to lead a good life, then we are wise. If they do not, then we must engage in a process of evaluation which will help to determine where we have gone off the rails. It is with this process of evaluation that schools can have a major impact.

In what remains of this section, I want to break down some of the component skills which could usefully help students down a path to wisdom. Some may argue that such a breaking down is the antithesis of wisdom. Wisdom, they argue, is about integration and finding a balance amongst various aspects of our lives. I agree. However, I also want to remind us that what I am outlining is not a process for teaching wisdom. Rather it is teaching for wisdom. We can make this clearer by considering an analogy.

Imagine we are teaching a young child to play basketball. One way to go about this is to simply throw her into a game and let her figure it out. A better way however is to break down the component pieces of the game and let her develop these fundamentals on their own. So we could teach her basic passing techniques, dribbling, defense, shooting. Further, we could give her some theory about the game, how it is played, what are some of the more common strategies involved and why they make sense within the greater context (the teaching of these individual skills can, of course, be done in the form of a game or integrated in some limited way). Once the child has all these fundamentals, then she can be placed into a game situation where she must integrate the various skills. I want to claim that in teaching for wisdom, we are doing something similar. Within schools, we can give students certain skills and capacities. Further, we can give them some understanding of how these skills can be used and why they are important. Ultimately, however, it is the individual’s responsibility to make use of these skills, to integrate
them into a total package. With our basketball analogy, the student was placed into a game. With wisdom, the individual goes forth to encounter life. Of course, as Dewey and others have pointed out, the school setting itself is a miniature community. As such, there will be ample opportunity within schools for students to try out what they are learning.

Accepting then that it is useful to break the learning required for wisdom down into various things (skills, dispositions, good judgement, etc.) which are usefully attained by students, the question then becomes what are these attainments? First, if we are to be evaluating our value commitments, then we must be aware of what these commitments are. Here we can see the use of a project like Louis Raths’ values clarification (see chapter 4 for more details on this). It is not my intention to get into much detail about how such clarification could be taught. However, we can imagine how studying literature could be a very useful way of identifying values which motivate fictional characters. There are also various projects which seek to elicit such teaching from students’ experiences in their every day lives (see, for example, Boss 1995, Teaching Ethics Through Community Service).

Once students are clear about what values are motivating their actions, they then need some way of evaluating if these values are good ones or not. This will involve having students attempt to conceive what, for them, is a good life. The answer which many school-aged children will come up with regarding what is a good life is not likely an answer that will endure very long in their lives. However the purpose is not to find a conception of the good life that will last throughout one’s life. Instead, we want students to begin thinking about their everyday value judgements in relation to the kind of life that they want to live. As Dewey pointed out, “[t]he difficulty in the way of attaining and maintaining practical wisdom is the urgency of immediate
impulse and desire which swell and swell until they crowd out all thought of remote and comprehensive goods” (1908, p.57). If students can get into the habit of evaluating their immediate desires in relation to how it will impact their life as a whole, they will make great strides down the road to wisdom.

It is also important to help students be aware that a good life for them will also impact other people and other life in their surrounding community and beyond. While the good life is theirs to choose, it is not necessarily an egoist one. By attempting to construct and evaluate a conception of the good life within the communal setting of a classroom, students can be given immediate feedback on how their choices will impact on others’ lives. While not guaranteeing that this will influence one’s value choices, this immediate evidence can be helpful in making students aware of others’ needs and desires.

In addition to having a conception of a good life, students will need some understanding of how values are related to this good life. Recall Dewey’s schema of how value evaluations look both forwards and backwards. We must be able to look forwards and anticipate likely consequences of our actions. We must also be able to look back to our experiences which closely approximate those anticipated consequences in order to help us judge whether the anticipated consequences are desirable or not. This looking forward and back will involve many further attainments and knowledges. To anticipate likely consequences we will need a certain understanding of our community and society. To link these consequences, we will need a discerning ‘eye’ which will recognize which features of the experience are relevant, which are peripheral. Further, we will need some capacity to critically evaluate where there are linkages and how relevant they are. It will also be useful for students to be able to critically examine their
own communities to see where certain values come from and why they exist. By being clear on the origin of values, students are in a better position to decide whether these are values which in fact are valuable (that is, that deserve to be maintained and adopted).

In chapter 2, I alluded to some of the responsibilities schools have within democracies. They must give students certain skills to be able to be responsible citizens. Further, they need to introduce students to the society in which they are living and give students an understanding of how this society works. The kinds of skills I am arguing that are necessary for this wisdom project overlap with these other skills to a great degree. In teaching for wisdom, we are trying to get students to understand the world in which they live; we want them to develop certain critical thinking skills and dispositions. So not only is this wisdom project consistent with a project of educating citizens, the two complement each other very well.

The element of my wisdom project which might seem most controversial is the task of getting students to critically think about what constitutes a good life. Even though this goes beyond much of what currently happens in schools, it is in no way at odds with what is needed in the name of educating citizens. If we seriously want each individual to choose for herself what goods in life to pursue, then she needs to be capable of thinking seriously about these questions.

**V.Iii Common Beliefs About Wisdom**

If a conception strays too far from its ordinary understanding, people will likely ignore it or brush it aside. Thus if a conception is to have any use, it must be reasonably close to the common notions which surround the concept. To judge my conception of wisdom against the common usage, I will compare it to some of the near-universal beliefs which accompany thinking
about wisdom. While there may be many different ideas of what exactly wisdom is, most of these ideas will be able to account for certain beliefs about wisdom. In this section, I will look to several of these beliefs and show how they can be accommodated within my conception.

One of the most striking features about academic writing on wisdom is the high percentage of the writing that occurs in journals dealing with issues of aging or gerontology (see, for example, Blanchard-Fields, Brannan & Camp, 1987; Taranto, 1989). The connection here is the belief that wisdom is the unique domain of the aged. I disagree that this is necessarily true. There can always be found counter-examples of young people who are quite wise (to say nothing of the multitude of aged people who are not wise). However, I do agree that there is a connection.

Within the schema of my wisdom conception, we can see why this makes sense. For one, it usually takes time to fully work out a reasonable conception of what a good life is. We can imagine some eighteen-year-olds for whom a good life includes lots of pizza, getting drunk and having sex. In other words, such young people have a rather limited conception of what will contribute to a good life. Many (though certainly not all) have little understanding of the value of overcoming hardships, making sacrifices for the benefit of others and forging certain types of caring relationships.

In order to more fully develop this sense of a good life, we need the capacity to evaluate our lives and our value commitments. As I have outlined above, this is quite a complex task, one which can take many years to become proficient at. These two factors give us reason to think that wisdom is far more likely to be attained as we get older. Thus there is some truth to the adage that wisdom is more commonly found in older people.
A second common belief about wisdom is that it somehow involves self-knowledge. This too makes sense within my conception of wisdom. Only when we know what is important in our lives can we act so as to realize this life. In other words, before I can decide what is a good life, I must know what is important to me (though note, this does not imply what is important will necessarily be egoistic in any sense). Recall again Dewey's process of looking ahead. Value commitments will be chosen and evaluated based upon the consequences they will likely bring about. It will take some experience and self-knowledge to know/judge what consequences are important to me. Again, in order to develop this sense of a good life, I need to be able to evaluate my value commitments. To do this, I need to know what values are motivating me. This too can be seen as a type of knowledge of oneself.

A third common view about wisdom is that it cannot be taught but rather must be developed through experience. This belief underlies my contention that schools can teach for wisdom, but cannot teach wisdom itself. Teaching for wisdom, as I have outlined it, involves getting students to recognize the value commitments which motivate their actions and giving them the capacity to evaluate these commitments. The process will only lead to wisdom, however, if the student practices the skills. She will need many different life experiences to learn what states of being are good ones (for her). Further, she will need the actual experience of evaluating what she thinks are her value judgements. Experience can teach her whether the factors which she is evaluating are relevant ones. It can also teach her whether her evaluations are good ones or not. Schools can give students the tools and materials necessary for developing wisdom. But it is the student herself who must actually use the tools. Only she can make herself wise.
In this section I have taken three common beliefs about wisdom and shown how each has some truth within my explication of wisdom. While this does not establish that my conception of wisdom is therefore a good one, it does suggest that I am at least on the right track.

**VI.iv Potential Problems**

Some might object to my conception of wisdom that it is too intellectual, too rational. Some readers might rather see wisdom talked about as a kind of intuition. Others might prefer to talk about wisdom in terms of rewards for past lives well lived. Others yet might think of wisdom as attending upon a certain position attained in one’s community: shaman, elder, judge, elected official (ha ha!).

These and other ways of talking about wisdom are all possible and my conception of wisdom is not meant to rule out any of them. Instead, I have attempted to develop one conception of wisdom which would fit well given certain constraints. These constraints concern what kinds of things ought to be taught within an education system in a liberal democratic state. Thus a critique of my conception cannot be that it does not talk in some way, x. Rather the critique must be that the way I do talk about wisdom is somehow flawed. To this point, I hope my arguments have been internally consistent, sound and so forth. If so, then what is left is to question the actual usefulness of this conception.

**VI.v Usefulness**

This project began as I was thinking about this question: what kinds of things ought to be taught in schools in a liberal democracy? There were many answers that I thought of, and that I
encountered. But the one that seemed most fundamental (and one which I was not finding much talk about) was how to help students live a good life. This answer was, I am sure, implicit in many of the other answers I found. However, by embedding this feature within other answers, educators and theorists were presupposing to an extent what a good life would be. For example, I'm sure those that argue that education is necessary for getting a good job sincerely believe that a good job is something which will lead to a good life. However, instead of deciding this for students, why not ask the question explicitly and let students make up their own minds about what will constitute a good life?

To have wisdom (as I talk about it) as a conscious and explicit goal of education is to ask students to consider what is a good life. For students to be aware that such a question is relevant, and one which they need to answer, is already to give them some important first steps down the path to wisdom. It is to open a door and show them a path which can be walked. When that consideration can be done thoughtfully, with care and with some methodological sub-structure, then students are that much further along the path to living well, to being wise.

Students will not always choose to walk this path. Some may want to, but not be able to develop the skills and dispositions necessary for advancing on the path. But this is true of any educational endeavour. It should not discourage us from attempting to teach what is really the most important lesson in life; how to live well.

The question persists, is my conception at all useful? There are three components to an answer to this question. The first asks whether the aims I seek to fulfill are at all desirable. I obviously think so and find it hard to imagine many people who would not want an education which would help students to live the best possible lives they can. The second component asks
whether or not the way I conceive wisdom will in fact lead us to this desired goal. Here again I am convinced of its usefulness. By clarifying what could be involved in attaining wisdom and offering suggestions as to how we could teach for this attainment, I believe my conception has offered a way of reaching the desired goal. The third component asks how feasibly could such an approach be integrated into an educational system. This is an aspect of the question which I do not have an answer for. Without more detail about how such things as critical thinking and practical reasoning might be taught, I am not in a position to judge how well my conception might fit into classrooms and curricula of today’s schools. Filling out the details is the fodder for another project. However, I do find it encouraging that the types of things which would need to be taught if wisdom is to be a goal of education also need to be taught for other reasons within liberal democratic states. This consistency and overlap suggests that my conception of wisdom could fruitfully find a place in a curriculum somewhere.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


