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# Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom and what it means for moral education in schools

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## ABSTRACT

Aristotle took practical wisdom to include cleverness, and something more. The hard question, that he does not explicitly answer, is what this something more is. On my interpretation, the practically wise are not merely more knowledgeable about what is good for people. They are also better able to discern all the values at stake, in whatever circumstances they find themselves. This is an ability that good people develop, typically rather late in life, provided they are masters of their own affairs. According to Aristotle, this development is stunted by wickedness and also by wretchedness. It follows from his account that attempts to teach this virtue are not likely to succeed unless teachers have opportunities for developing practical wisdom through their work. Aristotle's arguments give us reasons to doubt that teachers can help their students to become virtuous and wise, if their own way to earn a living is not conducive to human flourishing. If we take his message to heart, we should, first and foremost, think about how to steer clear of wretched work conditions, where teachers' moral agency is narrowly circumscribed.

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In a recent book, entitled *Aristotelian Character Education*, Kristján Kristjánsson (2015, pp. 85–130) argues that schools should teach children phronesis, the intellectual virtue that was analysed and described by Aristotle in Book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE).<sup>1</sup> Several other recent publications about the philosophy of education give pride of place to this intellectual excellence that is most often called *practical wisdom*. In his works on the ethics of teaching, Chris Higgins (2011, 2015), for instance, argues that teachers' self-cultivation is a necessary condition of successful school education and suggests that teacher education should be organised around the virtue of practical wisdom. Other philosophers of education who have argued for the central role of practical wisdom in teacher education include thinkers as diverse as Gert Biesta (2015) and David Carr (2007).

While I endorse Kristjánsson's proposal to make moral character, in the Aristotelian sense, an explicit aim of school education, I have some doubts about mandating teachers to teach practical wisdom in institutions where their own moral agency is narrowly circumscribed.

I am also in favour of what Higgins says about the ethics of teaching. He applies the Aristotelian view of ethical excellence, as simultaneously conducive to the good of oneself and the good of others, to teachers and their work. He argues, quite convincingly, that a virtue ethics of teaching is not only about what teachers must do for their students, it is also about how

tending to the growth of others can nourish their own growth. Still, I have some nagging reservations about his proposal to emphasise practical wisdom in pre-service education for teachers. I don't think it would be wrong *per se* to do so, but neither do I think it very likely to bear much fruit until and unless teachers have ample opportunities to exercise practical wisdom in their work.

In what follows, I shall present an interpretation of what Aristotle says about practical wisdom and argue that, if his account is right, then my reservations deserve to be taken seriously. Granted his view of what practical wisdom is and how it is acquired, the most pressing questions about how schools are to foster such intellectual excellence are not about how to teach practical wisdom to children. Neither are they about the pre-service education of teachers. If we take Aristotle's message to heart, we should, first and foremost, think about how to organise schools so as to enable practicing teachers to develop practical wisdom through their work.

### Practical wisdom and the unity of virtues

In the beginning of Book II of the NE, Aristotle says that practical wisdom owes its birth and growth to teaching (NE, 1103a14–15). In Book VI, he describes it as the very pinnacle of moral development, and says that 'with the presence of [...], practical wisdom, will be given all the excellences' (NE, 1145a1–2). Granted these two theses—i.e. that it can be taught, and that those who possess it have all the virtues—it may seem to follow, as a matter of course, that practical wisdom should be taught to all. Nevertheless, some of the things Aristotle says about practical wisdom give us reasons to doubt that his theory, about how practical wisdom relates to the moral virtues, lends support to proposals to teach practical wisdom in schools. For one thing, he thinks that young people cannot acquire practical wisdom because it requires experience which they do not have (NE, 1142a11–19). For another thing, his contention that those who have practical wisdom have all the virtues does not imply that people acquire other virtues by learning practical wisdom. His point is, rather, that people who are not virtuous cannot learn practical wisdom (NE, 1144a29–31). In short, although Aristotle thought that practical wisdom can be taught and learned, he also subscribed to the following two propositions:

P1. Practical wisdom is not learned by young people.

P2. Those who have learned practical wisdom have also acquired all the moral virtues.

It seems to follow, from P1 and P2, that moral education cannot begin with a course in practical wisdom. It is something people learn rather late in life.

It is clear from the context, in Book VI, that Aristotle took P2 to be literally true. It is also clear that he thought that Socrates was right in saying that all moral excellences implied practical wisdom (NE, 1144b20–21), and subscribed to:

P3. Those who have one moral virtue also have practical wisdom.

The unity of all virtues follows from P3 and P2. The argument can be laid out as a Barbara type syllogism:

All persons who have one moral virtue have practical wisdom.

All persons who have practical wisdom have all the moral virtues.

Ergo: All persons who have one moral virtue have all the moral virtues.

Aristotle took practical wisdom to be an intellectual, not a moral, excellence (NE, 1103a5–6). Its function is to find out what is true (NE, 1139b12) about 'things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate' (NE, 1141b8–9). This, in conjunction with P2, entails that an intellectual ability to find out what is true about human affairs requires moral goodness. Aristotle

seems to have thought that no one could be a super-intelligent villain: that is, one who always knows right from wrong, but doesn't care. He also excluded the possibility of being, simultaneously, morally good and too simple-minded to count as practically wise. In another context, writing about magnanimity (*megalopsychia*) in Book II of the *NE*, he says explicitly that 'no excellent man is foolish or silly' (*NE*, 1123b3–4).

Some of the consequences of what Aristotle says may seem counterintuitive and implausible. Why can't a man be, say, liberal without being courageous, or temperate without being magnanimous? In his book about Aristotelian character education mentioned above, Kristjánsson comments briefly on the unity-of-virtue thesis, and says that it is 'devilishly difficult [...] both to interpret and assess' (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 96). Other scholars have also found the unity-of-virtue thesis hard to understand. Rosalind Hursthouse, for instance, described it, in a paper originally presented in 1994, as a 'notoriously difficult doctrine' (Hursthouse, 2018, p. 28). Notwithstanding these difficulties, we need to understand why Aristotle subscribed to P2 if we want to apply his concept of practical wisdom. That such wisdom requires all the virtues is not a minor aside, but is, rather, central to his account.

Before trying to solve the hard problem of explaining P2, I want to say a few words about P3, i.e. the thesis that no virtue is possible without practical wisdom. Aristotle's argument for it rests on his distinction between *natural virtue* and *virtue in the strict sense* (*NE*, 1144b1–10). He does not exclude the possibility of natural virtue without practical wisdom. On his account, simple goodness is possible without much intellectual ability, and he mentions that both children and animals can have such a natural disposition. But simple goodness, or natural virtue, does not always lead to right action. Without thought, they can even be harmful. In what follows, Aristotle says that the difference between natural virtue, and virtue in the strict sense, is that the latter cannot come to exist without practical wisdom (*NE*, 1144b15–16). This seems plausible because, if virtue in the strict sense is a reliable and unflinching tendency to do what is right and good, and those who lack intellectual ability are likely to commit harm inadvertently, then virtue in the strict sense requires intellectual ability.

Aristotle's text gives us reasons for thinking that he took virtue, in the strict sense, to be a combination of natural virtue and practical wisdom (Curzer, 2012, pp. 293–304), and subscribed to something like the following definition:

D1. Virtue in the strict sense = natural virtue & practical wisdom.

This makes P3 a matter of definition. It is questionable, though, to what extent the reasons, mentioned above, support this definition. They do lend some support to thinking of virtue in the strict sense as natural virtue, in combination with enough intellectual ability to know when, and how, to act in accordance with, say, courage or temperance. But why should each single virtue (in the strict sense) require perfect practical wisdom? Is it not more plausible that at least some of them only call for a part of the intellectual abilities that constitute practical wisdom? Aristotle very likely thought, for instance, that perfect courage required the intelligence to find out, under all sorts of circumstances, how to evaluate what courage requires when there are many values at stake, some of which may have to do with virtues other than courage. He might have argued, perhaps, that to do so unflinchingly, one needed perfect practical wisdom.

I have now pointed out one possible explanation of why Aristotle took P3 to be true. But what about P2? Why can't bad people have the intellectual ability to find out what is true about human affairs?

As a step towards understanding P2, let us rehearse Aristotle's distinction between practical wisdom and cleverness. He says, on the one hand, that practical wisdom does not exist without cleverness and, on the other hand, that practical wisdom does not acquire its formed state without the aid of virtue (*NE*, 1144a29–31). It seems clear that he believed both that bad people could be clever, and that practical wisdom involved cleverness plus something more. The hard

question, one that he does not explicitly answer, is what this other ingredient of practical wisdom is. What do we have to add to cleverness to get practical wisdom?

David Bostock (2000, p. 89) suggests that Aristotle took practical wisdom to be a combination of cleverness and natural virtue. I admit that some parts of his text seem to give reasons for thinking that he assumed something like the following definition:

D2. Practical wisdom = natural virtue & cleverness.

From D1 and D2, it follows that there is no difference between virtue in the strict sense and practical wisdom. This follows because, if these two definitions hold, then we can use D2 to replace the phrase 'practical wisdom' in D1 with the conjunction 'natural virtue & cleverness' and get:

D3. Virtue in the strict sense = natural virtue & natural virtue & cleverness.

Granted that it makes no difference whether natural virtue is counted once or counted twice; then according to D2 and D3, there is no difference between practical wisdom and virtue in the strict sense. This can, however, not be the correct interpretation because, in the final chapter of Book VI, Aristotle says that Socrates went astray when he identified virtue with reason (NE, 1144b18–21).

Even if we reject D2, it is still an open question whether practical wisdom is merely a combination of cleverness and certain abilities, dispositions, or habits that constitute the moral virtues. Courage, temperance, justice, and other virtues are composite states; possibly, some of the elements that make up a complete virtue in the strict sense are among the ingredients that, when they are added to cleverness, yield practical wisdom. This is saying that Aristotle may have thought something like:

D4. Practical wisdom = some elements of the moral virtues & cleverness.

Coope (2012) discusses possibilities of this type and defends an account of practical wisdom according to which it includes taking pleasure in fine action, in addition to an ability to find out what is true. I have not found anything in the text of the NE that rules out this interpretation. It seems doubtful, however, for two reasons. One reason is that it fits rather uneasily with some of Aristotle's remarks about the intellectual virtues. In the beginning of Book VI, he says, for instance, that truth is the function of practical wisdom (NE, 1139b12). It does not seem plausible that an excellence, which serves to find out what is true, is defined in terms of taking pleasure in fine action. The other reason, which I see as the weightier one, is that we can ask about any definition which fits the scheme laid out in D4: Why can't someone have just these elements of the moral virtues, and thus have practical wisdom without complete virtue?

It seems impossible to derive P2 from mere definitions, or from logical truths, without practical wisdom being conceived of as including the moral virtues, in the way Aristotle admonished Socrates for doing. It is clear that Aristotle had serious objections to such identification of moral virtue and rationality.

What options are left? How can we understand P2 if we see practical wisdom and natural virtue as logically distinct?

Aristotle's statements, which I paraphrase with P2, are in the 13th and final chapter of Book VI. In the preceding chapter, Ch. 12, he says that moral excellence 'makes the aim right, and practical wisdom the things leading to it' (NE, 1144a7–9). A little later, in the same chapter, he adds that 'there is a faculty which is called cleverness; and this is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it' (NE, 1144a23–26). Here Aristotle describes both cleverness and practical wisdom as abilities for achieving our aims. This, in conjunction with what he says about truth being the function of wisdom, indicates that he saw both cleverness and practical wisdom as abilities to discern, find, or figure out the truths people need to know in order to achieve their aims.

This may seem a bit like Hume's (1978) account, in the third chapter of the second book of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, of reason as the slave of the passions. In a sense it is true that, like Hume, Aristotle saw practical reason as an instrumental ability that we use to get what we desire. But he saw it also as an ability to correct our desires. So, although Aristotle described both cleverness and practical wisdom as instruments to achieve our ends, he did not think of them as the slaves of irrational whims. As Christopher C. W. Taylor (2016) argues, conclusively in my view, Aristotle thought of the ability to choose aims as involving rationality. Good people use their rational abilities to modify aims that go counter to the most overarching aim, the one he designates with the word *eudaimonia*—variously translated as *flourishing*, *well-being*, or *happiness*. If I understand Aristotle's thinking about the rationality of aims, people seek *eudaimonia* as a long term, overarching aim, and therefore use their intellectual abilities to find, and learn to desire, aims closer at hand that are subservient to or contribute to it. Some of these minor aims are instrumental, by virtue of contributing causally to something that is good and desirable. Some are what L. H. G. Greenwood (1909) called constitutive means in his introductory essay to Book VI of the *NE* because they exemplify goodness, or are parts or aspects of *eudaimonia*. Finding the right measures, or proper short-term aims, is an intellectual task, as it involves finding truths that can be used to serve more overarching or long-term aims. So, although practical wisdom is instrumental, it also plays a vital role in choosing which goals to seek, and what desires to nurture.

## Two aspects of practical wisdom

What we have found out so far is that cleverness is an ability to find the truths we need to know in order to achieve our aims, and that practical wisdom is cleverness plus something else. And, finally, that this something else is something that people do not learn unless they are virtuous. We still do not know what this something else is. We know, however, that although both the clever and the practically wise reach their aims, it is only the latter who do so without doing anything base, bad, or reprehensible. Those who are merely clever fail, at least sometimes, to do what is best, either because they choose bad aims, or because they use bad means to reach their aims.

I do not think we can draw a sharp distinction between means, and sub-aims that are stepping stones towards more worthy aims. Both are measures we take to achieve something we desire. Nevertheless, we can draw a distinction between knowledge about what is, in general, good for people, and knowledge about what measures are appropriate under present circumstances. In light of this, I think we can assume that the difference between the clever and the practically wise is either, or both, that:

- A1. The practically wise know better what final aims (i.e. aims that are not stepping stones to something else) to seek.
- A2. The practically wise know better what measures are appropriate to reach their aims.

Aristotle, apparently, took A1 to be true because he said that 'it is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what [...] sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general' (*NE*, 1140a25–28).

The latter option, A2, is also plausible. Some of the possible stepping stones, and the means towards an end, may thwart other worthwhile pursuits, have bad side effects, or involve ignoble conduct. To avoid such measures, one needs the ability to apprehend all the moral values at stake. This is an intellectual ability to do more than just find *some* means to a given end. It is the ability to choose the measures that are best, all things considered.

Both A1 and A2 have strong presumptions in their favour. *Phronesis* is, as Eve Rabinoff argues in a recent book about the role of perception in Aristotle's moral psychology, a twofold ability.

On the one hand, it involves knowledge about what to aim at and, on the other, an ability to perceive the concrete situation correctly. These two abilities form an integrated whole because ‘the aims that one adopts influence the way things appear to one’ (Rabinoff, 2018, p. 133). It is, however, only one of the two aspects of practical wisdom, namely A2, that helps us to understand why Aristotle believed P2, i.e. that those who have practical wisdom have all the moral virtues. The other aspect, A1, does not lend support to P2 because it is possible to know what is good for people without having all the moral virtues.

That A1 does not support P2 follows from Aristotle’s account of what he calls *akrasia*, sometimes translated with the phrase *weakness of will*, and sometimes with the word *incontinence*. According to what he says, in Book VII, the incontinent can have general knowledge about how they should act in a given kind of situation (Curzer, 2012, p. 315; Dahl, 2009; Rabinoff, 2018).

The opposite of *akrasia* is called *enkrateia* by Aristotle (NE, 1945a17), and that term is commonly rendered as *continence*, but it can also be translated as *self-restraint* or *self-control*. Aristotle argues that people who have bad desires and are, therefore, lacking in moral excellence, can both know and do what is right, provided they have enough continence or self-restraint (NE, 1102b28, 1119b15–18, 1146a9–12).

From what Aristotle says about continence, or self-restraint, it is clear that he thought that people who lack moral virtue can use knowledge of what is for their own good, to guide their conduct. Virtuous people do what reason dictates because they only desire what is truly good. The virtuous have no need to subdue bad desires; therefore, they do not need any continence or self-restraint. In addition to the virtuous, there is another group of people who know what is good, and act accordingly because they have enough self-restraint to subdue their unvirtuous desires or appetites. It seems to follow that people can know what aims to seek without having all the virtues and, therefore, that in so far as practical wisdom involves such knowledge, it does not require virtue. So, if practical wisdom requires virtue, it does so because it involves something other than mere knowledge about which aims to seek.

This was about aspect A1, and why it does not suffice to explain why Aristotle believed P2. Let’s now look at A2 and see how it helps us to understand the unity-of-virtue thesis.

In order to be consistently, and unfailingly, right about what measures entail neither bad side effects nor bad conduct, people need to move nimbly through life, quick to find out what steps to avoid. If the moral world is like a china shop, those who move like a bull may get what they want, but as they make their way among the shelves, they break lots of things.

The difference between the practically wise and the merely clever seems to be that the practically wise are not only more knowledgeable about what aims to seek, but also sufficiently agile to discern, in time, all the values at stake, in whatever circumstances they find themselves. They have what Gerard G. Hughes calls ‘the ability to read the individual situations aright’ (Hughes, 2001, p. 102). This is an intellectual ability; it is conceivable, and logically possible, that someone apprehends everything that is morally relevant, but doesn’t give a damn. It is thus logically possible to have practical wisdom and still lack some virtues. Nevertheless, it is plausible that, for ordinary humans, this intellectual ability requires moral virtue. This is because what people do not care about they often do not notice.

The moral virtues, as described by Aristotle, are primarily constituted by wanting, desiring, and caring about what is noble and good. If my interpretation is right, the key to understanding why Aristotle thought that practical wisdom required all the virtues is that people are psychologically (rather than logically) unable to learn to take heed unless they learn to care. To take heed of all that matters, people need to care about all relevant values, in all sorts of circumstances. Therefore, they need all the virtues.

This interpretation is consistent with what Aristotle says explicitly about practical wisdom in the NE. It must, however, be admitted that his explanations of why he subscribes to P2 are scanty, and do not suffice to establish, beyond doubt, that this is what he meant. Discussing the moral virtues in Book III, he does say, however, that ‘perhaps the good man differs from others

most by seeing the truth in each class of things' (NE, 1113a29–30), and the explicit reason he gives in Book VI—for why it is impossible to be practically wise without being good—is that 'wickedness perverts us and causes us to be deceived about the starting points of action' (NE, 1144a34–36). I shall conclude my interpretation of what Aristotle says about practical wisdom with some comments on this 'wickedness' that causes us to be deceived.

### What causes us to be deceived

The word that is translated with *wickedness* (in NE, 1144a35) is *mochtheria*. Although this word sometimes means *wickedness*, the primary meaning is *low estate, bad condition, or badness* (Liddell, McKenzie, Jones, & Scott, 1940); but it can also be translated as *toil, hardship, or wretchedness* (Morwood & Taylor, 2002). It is of the same root as the noun *mochthos*, which means *toil, hardship, or misery*, and the verb *mochtheo*, meaning to *toil or suffer*.

In his *Politics* (Pol), Aristotle criticises the communism among the upper classes, advocated by Plato in the *Republic*, and says that what causes evil in the city states is *mochtheria* rather than *akoinonesia*, that is, the absence of communism (Pol, 1263b20–25). As examples of the evils caused by *mochtheria*, he mentions 'suits about contracts, convictions for perjury, flatteries of rich men and the like' (Pol, 1263b15–20). The word translated with *flatteries* is *kolakeia*, a word that can also mean fawning. That flatteries or fawning of rich men is included as one of three examples of evils caused by *mochtheria* gives us reason to think that for Aristotle this word connoted low social status, or wretchedness, no less than wickedness. The other two examples are at least compatible with interpreting it as the opposite of nobility.

It seems plausible that the badness that deceives us, according to Aristotle, is not only bad character, but also bad conditions. The meaning of the word he uses, to name the condition that prevents people from learning practical wisdom, covers both wickedness and wretchedness. I think this twofold sense of the word matters to our understanding of his account of practical wisdom as an intellectual excellence, one that takes a long time to acquire (P1) and requires all the moral virtues (P2).

When *mochtheria* is translated as *wickedness*, the other half of what it means is brushed aside. It may seem tempting to think that what is of philosophical importance is adequately covered by the word *wickedness*, and that Aristotle's view of wretched people as unable to acquire practical wisdom only reflects his aristocratic prejudices against the labouring poor. That Aristotle harboured such prejudices is clear from several remarks he makes in his *Politics*. There he says, for instance, that the life of artisans or tradesmen 'is ignoble and inimical to excellence' (Pol, 1328b40), and that 'no man can practice excellence who is living the life of a mechanic or a labourer' (Pol, 1278a20–21). This seems diametrically opposed to what passes for common sense nowadays, namely, that good people are more likely to be found in the ranks of the labouring poor than among the rich and idle.

Aristotle does not say much about why excellence requires a good social condition. The most substantial reason he mentions, in the *Politics*, is that 'leisure is necessary both for the development of excellence and the performance of political duties' (Pol, 1328b41–42). He does not say that hard work, as such, prevents people from practicing excellence. What stands in the way of full moral development is lack of leisure and, hence, lack of opportunity to practice the virtues and participate in politics or perform political duties. Aristotle most likely thought that the opportunities that mattered involved moral agency, and the freedom to deliberate about the common weal, i.e. the kind of freedom that Benjamin Constant (1988, pp. 309–328) described, 200 years ago, as the liberty of the ancients.

Behind this, there seems to be an understanding of moral development as a process that continues through adult life. Although Aristotle described ideal types of virtue and wisdom, he was conscious of human frailty and thought that 'perhaps we must be content if, when all the

influences by which we are thought to become good are present, we get some tincture of excellence' (NE, 1179b18–20). On this interpretation, practical wisdom is, therefore, an excellence that good people develop to some extent—typically rather late in life—provided they are masters of their own affairs. Presumably, young people can take the first steps in a direction that eventually leads to practical wisdom if they communicate with adults who exercise such wisdom.

If propositions P1 and P2 hold true, then practical wisdom cannot be mastered by children, at least not the part of practical wisdom described by A2 above, i.e. the ability to apprehend what measures are appropriate. It seems more likely that children can learn general truths about what is good for people, and thus make some headway towards the elements of practical wisdom outlined by A1. Here Kristjánsson seems to agree, since the practical wisdom he proposes to teach in schools is primarily, or even exclusively, knowledge about what aims to seek (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 102). If my understanding of Aristotle is correct, this hardly counts as teaching more than just a part of the intellectual virtue he was concerned with.

Teaching this part of practical wisdom, however small it is, may nevertheless be beneficial. But who can do it? Don't we need practically wise teachers to guide students towards practical wisdom? This brings us back to Higgins's (2011) proposal to organise the education of teachers around the virtue of practical wisdom.

Can young adults, who are studying to become teachers, learn practical wisdom? I doubt if anybody knows because, as Kristjánsson (2015, pp. 85–86) points out, very little has been written about how to teach and learn this intellectual virtue. Suppose, however, that it can be done. Suppose we have some programs, or course materials, that help would-be-teachers, or at least those of them who are morally good persons, to progress towards practical wisdom. Where does that leave us, if they have only very limited opportunities to exercise such wisdom in their daily work after they have completed their education? Trying to learn practical wisdom, without looking forward to exercising it in real-life situations, seems a bit like learning to be liberal, generous, or helpful, without any hope of ever having a thing to give, or a moment to spare. Such wretchedness makes successful teaching and learning of the Aristotelian virtues very unlikely.

If what Aristotle said is literally true, we should not expect teachers to complete their own moral education as a part of their pre-service education. Learning to become practically wise is a lifelong process of development, one whose growth is stunted if the opportunities people have for exercising their intellectual abilities are too limited.

Teachers who are required to use prescribed methods and materials and to work towards aims that are fixed by external authorities are not encouraged to use reason concerning the most important questions pertaining to their work. If they are also required to follow codified rules of procedure every time some problem comes up, then their work comes close to what Joseph Dunne (2011) has described as a practitioner-proof mode of practice. On the interpretation presented in this article, such work conditions are, as Aristotle would have said, 'inimical to excellence' (Pol, 1328b40) since they leave little room for deliberation. It seems to follow that more is needed, not just improved teacher education, to make schools foster practical wisdom. A recognition of this seems implicit in some of Higgins's (2011) arguments that hark back to what Maxine Greene said in the *The Dialectic of Freedom*, namely, that 'a teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own' (Greene, 1988, p. 14). His argument is also closely related to Dewey's (1916) plea for more democratic schools. As I have argued elsewhere (Harðarson, 2018), the central arguments of *Democracy and Education* are primarily arguments for teachers' professional autonomy, and workplace democracy in schools. Higgins, Greene, and Dewey all pose the same question: Can teachers help their students to become virtuous and wise, if their own way to earn a living is not conducive to human flourishing?

When we try to illuminate what goes on in our schools, what qualities are visible depends on the colour of the light. Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom is like a spotlight that makes some features of modern schools, features that would otherwise not be noticed, readily

observable. In light of what he said about practical wisdom, it appears to me that if we want to understand how schools can foster practical wisdom, then we should focus on how teachers can exercise such wisdom in their work.

Some recent publications, on system-wide changes in schools in many countries, give us reasons to suspect, and to fear, that the moral agency of teachers, and the opportunities they have to exercise practical wisdom in their work, are more circumscribed now than a few decades back. Roy Lowe (2007), for instance, tells a story of how teachers in the UK have lost control of their work. Dana Goldstein (2014) gives a similar account of what has befallen teachers in the United States, where increased emphasis on standards and accountability has undermined their professional autonomy since the 1980s at least. Likewise, writing about increased public scrutiny of teachers in New Zealand, John Codd (1999, 2005) argues that ‘trust breeds more trust and conversely distrust breeds more and more distrust, producing virtuous or vicious circles’ (Codd, 1999, p. 50). In his view, low-trust goes hand in hand with hierarchical control and reduced moral agency. Quoting the New Zealand economist Timothy John Hazledine, Codd reminds the reader that people who are not trusted will eventually become untrustworthy (Codd, 1999, pp. 49–51). This seems not very far from Aristotle’s view of how wretchedness arrests moral development.

The trends described in these publications seem to undermine teachers’ opportunities to exercise practical wisdom. Under such conditions, attempts to incorporate practical wisdom in school curricula, and in teacher education programs, will probably not be of much practical import. For that, teachers must first get more control over their own work, more moral agency, and more opportunities to become masters of their own affairs.

## Note

1. I use the terms *practical wisdom* to translate *phronesis*. For *arete* I use both *virtue* and *excellence*. All quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from the translation of W. D. Ross (in Aristotle, 2014). Quotations from Aristotle’s *Politics* are from B. Jowett’s translation (in Aristotle, 2014). Where I believe that nuances of the Greek text, which may get lost in translation, matter, I use the editions on <https://el.wikisource.org/> (i.e. Aristotle, 2015, 2017).

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