

CHAPTER 1

PHILOSOPHY AS THE LOVE OF WISDOM

Chapter Outline

1. Philosophy and the Love of Wisdom
2. A Practical Example: Shopping
3. What Philosophy Can Do For You
4. On Getting and Giving Wisdom: The Story of Plato's Cave
5. The Basic Elements of Philosophy as a Love of Wisdom

Chapter Objectives:

In this chapter you will take a first look at the world of philosophy. You will think a bit about wisdom, asking what a “love of wisdom” might do for you. You will reflect on your own shopping habits, taking note of the values that shape the way we shop. You will hear of the benefits of philosophy. You will read a story about someone who was stuck in a cave and then set free. You will learn about where this book is going and what you might learn in the course of this text. You will be introduced to the primary elements that are involved in a life of wisdom. And in the Journal Assignment you will search for a wise person and learn what others have to say about wisdom. After studying this chapter you should be able to:

- define both wisdom and philosophy.
- distinguish between the “discourse about” philosophy and *philosophy itself*
- give an extended example of how our life choices reflect philosophical issues.
- summarize some of the benefits of philosophy.
- describe the basic features of Plato's “Analogy of the Cave” and what it means.
- identify and describe the key aspects of the love of wisdom.

Philosophy and the Love of Wisdom

Philosophy: A Love of Wisdom, A Way of Life

Let's begin with a question. Who would you consider to be *wise*? Think about it. Are there two or three people that you would call "wise"? Who are they? What are they like? How would you summarize the nature of wisdom?

Now ask yourself another question. What do you think when you hear the word "philosophy"? Have you ever known a "philosopher"? What are philosophers like? How would you summarize the nature of philosophy?

Pythagoras, a famous thinker who lived around 500bce (bce means "before the common/Christian era; ce means "in the common era") was once asked if he was wise. He replied that he was not wise (only a god could be truly wise), but that he was a "*lover of wisdom.*" A "lover of wisdom" is a *philo-sopher* (*phileo* in Greek means "love"; *sophia* means "wisdom"). While philosophy can be defined in terms of a variety of concepts--a search for self-understanding, an exploration of fundamental questions, an analysis of what confronts us--in this text we will explore philosophy as a love of wisdom.

In modern times, philosophy has often been associated with complex esoteric questions and impractical analysis. Nonetheless, I am convinced that deep in the origins of philosophy throughout the world people pursued the love of wisdom as a "way of life." We need to recover this way of doing philosophy again today.¹ Philosophy was never meant to be merely an abstract analysis of arguments and ideas. Indeed, the exploration of arguments and ideas was only a part of learning how to live in harmony with the way things were. Take, for example, the ancient philosophical group known as the Stoics. Stoics called the debates regarding theories of physics, principles of logic, and values of ethics, "discourse about" philosophy. *Philosophy itself* was when the theories of physics were put into practice (by contemplating things rightly or working

¹ See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

with the things of physics as they really are), when logic was used (by speaking rightly), when ethics was lived (by conducting oneself properly).² Thus to approach philosophy as a love of wisdom and a “way of life” is to ask questions and to debate the philosophical arguments, also to stretch beyond questions, arguments and answers. Without ignoring the arguments, exploring philosophy as a way of life seeks to develop a set of competencies or “skills” appropriate to dealing with life as it comes. My hope for you, in this text, is not necessarily that you will be able to explain the ins and outs of idealist metaphysics (though that would certainly be fine), but rather that you would fall in love with wisdom, and that you might, along the way, acquire a few skills to help you live within that love.

Defining Wisdom and Philosophy

But just what *is* wisdom? And where is it to be found?

From ancient times, the term “wisdom” has referred not only to theoretical or “head” matters, but also to practical skills or “hand” matters. The one who was adept at a particular handicraft was considered “wise” in that craft. The term “wisdom” also had associations with one who was learned. Over time, the theoretical and the practical nuances of the term joined in the image of the “wise” person. The wise person was the one who had gained experience and knowledge such that they were respected and their advice was sought out by others. Wisdom, then can be understood as *an expertise in the art of living, gained through a synthesis of personal experience in the details of life with a careful reflection on the larger issues of life.*

The pursuit of wisdom, then, involves two sides. On the one side, we reflect on the larger issues of life, we think about the way things are. “Is this life all there is, or is there something after this life?” “Are people simply slaves of their own cultures, histories, and family backgrounds, or do they have freedom to change?” “What values are the most important values to honor in life?” These are some of the “larger issues” that wise people think about. But it is not

² See Pierre Hadot, “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” 266-268.

enough to have well-considered opinions on the larger issues of life. Wisdom also (on the other side) carefully considers the kind of *life* that is in harmony with the way that things are--insofar as “the way things are” has been grasped in careful reflection. What kind of life honors the respect for human freedom? If we decide that care for the earth is an important value to honor, then what difference might this value make in the details of our life: our eating, our clothing, our transportation?

A philosopher, then (a “lover of wisdom”), is one who seeks after a genuine dialogue of experience and reflection. A philosopher is a person who devotes energy toward the careful reflection about the larger issues of life and then who tries to live the details of life in light of this perspective. The academic questions have their place, as part of the pursuit of a “careful reflection on the larger issues of life.” But they are not the end of the matter. Life is what matters. It is about a full and careful evaluation of life and a life lived in light of this evaluation. This brings us to the point where we can venture a definition of philosophy as the love of wisdom. Philosophy, then, can be defined (and will be understood in this text) as:

The art and science of learning to respond, with all of our resources, to the fruit of a careful evaluation of life.

A Practical Example: Shopping

Do you shop? Of course you do. We all do. Well, then, what do you spend most of your time (or money) shopping *for*? How often do you shop? And where do you shop? We may all shop, but on these other matters we differ. Some of us shop once a week for food, carefully comparing prices between the local markets and the big super-stores. Some of us shop online for that special item, checking every day with E-Bay to find the best deal. Some of us go periodically to that new fashion shop to buy clothes. Others go to Salvation Army to find their clothing. Still others shop for fabric to make their own clothes. And still others “shop-lift” their clothes. Some of us buy used CDs at a pawn shop. Some go to a large book-and-music store. Some pay to download music online. Others borrow a friend’s CD and copy the files, or

download the files online without ever paying a cent. While we all shop, our shopping habits can differ quite a bit.

Why is this?

Let me ask you another question. *Why* do you shop? “That’s easy,” you might answer, “because I need things.” But then I would ask you still another question. Or perhaps two:

- Why do you think you *need* this item and not something else, or nothing at all?
- Why do you shop the *way* you do?

Now these two questions begin to take us a step deeper. At this point you may tell me a story about your life. You may tell me that your children have outgrown their shoes and that we can’t have them going barefoot. You may tell me that you shop at these stores because they are convenient or cheap or owned by local friends. You may shop online because you have learned the art of computer shopping and that it has become kind of a game for you, finding the perfect deal.

Let’s just limit ourselves to the subject of food for a moment. Consider these questions:

- Do you shop for food or do you grow, dumpster, barter your food? Why?
- Why do you buy the food that you do?
- Do you buy processed meals or basic ingredients?
- Do you buy food at farmers markets, health-food shops, or super-stores?
- On which food groups do you spend the most money (meat, dairy, vegetables, fruits, breads, other)?
- How often do you go out to eat? Why?

Here again, you may speak to me of convenience, price, enjoyment. You might also speak to me of health (Do you buy organic? Why or why not?). You might tell me a story of how your grandmother (and *her* grandmother) made this meal from scratch and that the act of cooking this meal itself is meaningful to you. You might tell me about coffee-bean laborers in South America getting poor wages: that is why you buy fair trade coffee. Or you might say, “I don’t know. I’ve

just always done it this way.” Now we are talking about *values* (about justice, about health, about the preservation of tradition), and about *habits* (how we have grown to do it).

We could take this conversation further. I could ask you what is so important about “convenience,” about “price,” about “justice,” about “tradition.” Just what is so special about eating out at a favorite restaurant once a month with your sweetheart? I could tell you to change your habits (doctors tell us this all the time). So what if you have always done it this way. Now do it different. Your survival depends on changing. Or I might disagree with your values. Who cares about your “values.” You have your values and I have mine. You believe in “justice.” I say all human beings are just animals and always will be. Go ahead and buy organic if you want to. I say, “Super-size me.”

But then, this brings us to a further question.

- Why are your values (or mine) *valued* at all?

Here you might tell me more stories. You might tell me about your parents and how they always brought you up to respect other people and to make sure others have fair wages. You might tell me about your own experience of poverty and how you learned to buy the cheapest items on sale. You might tell me of a book you read that describes the latest facts about nutrition. You might tell me that your religion values health and justice. You might give me a lecture on evolution, arguing that humans are rational, even spiritual, beings, and that the food we eat affects our mental purity. Now you are telling me about the *contexts* and the *sources* of your personal values. Now we are beginning to have a conversation about the meaning of life.

Finally, if I really wanted to be a pest, I could bother you with a few more questions:

- Are these bodies of ours--and the world of food and eating and such--really *real* anyway? Aren't our spirits what really counts?
- Or perhaps we are just atoms determined by other atoms, and all this talk about “health” and “justice” is a joke, because we have no real choice in things, anyway.

- How can we know anything? Farm worker mistreatment, nutrition “facts,” even the idea of “price” (there are often hidden costs): isn’t it all impossible for us to know? Isn’t language constantly twisted to mean whatever the system wants us to think?
- And aren’t “right and wrong” (“right” to preserve health, “wrong” to pay unfair wages) private issues, just like “convenience” (“right” to go to the nearby store, “wrong” to drive ten miles away for food)?

And about this time, you might just begin throwing food at me. And perhaps I would deserve it. But the point is this: as you begin to look more carefully at your shopping habits, even with regard to something as common as food, you begin to realize that *how we live and what we believe about things are all tied up together, even if we aren’t always aware of it.*

If we were to look a little deeper at the various areas of our lives (now consider not only shopping, but relationships, housing, use of time, and so on) we might discover that our habits actually reveal something about our values and beliefs: what we consider wise, true and important. And, conversely, we might also discover that by taking a careful look at our own values we might find some guidance for living. Philosophy, as a love of wisdom, is the art and science of learning to respond with all of our resources (mind, heart, actions, and such) to the fruit of a careful evaluation of life.

What Philosophy Can Do For You

The art and science of learning to respond to the fruit of careful evaluation involves different kinds of skills. First we must learn to evaluate life and then we must learn to respond appropriately to what has come up in our evaluation. There is both a thinking and a doing side of philosophy. It can be very practical. What is going on with my child? How do I respond to this child? There is a simple seeing of the way things are. There is the learning from what others have seen. There is the training of our habits to act according to what we have learned and seen. And then there is the way in which the details of life suggest new questions and new reflections about

things. My conviction is that a few lessons in philosophy as a love of wisdom can be some of the most valuable lessons you learn in life.

Take for example, the nursing student. You will graduate from college to serve patients in hospitals, in homes, in offices, in their suffering. Some might not believe they are sick. “It’s all in my head,” they might tell you. What makes sickness *real* anyway? So, just what *is* diagnosis? How do you know when someone is “sick”? You will need to think about these things, because you will face them later on. Some may come to you who are receiving acupuncture. They will tell you about the imbalance of “chi” in their lives. Is “chi” real? How do you know? What does “real” mean? Someone may ask you about their elderly parent who is on life support. Should they pull the plug? Is this killing? Is this wrong? And what does it mean to “care” for someone who is suffering from senility, someone who is developmentally disabled, someone who is mentally ill? What might wisdom look like in the nursing field?

You may be a business student. You will leave school to manage your own business or to serve in another business. Just how far will you go for profit? What are your boundaries and why? How are employees to be treated? Is there some basic standard by which workers should be treated or is it a matter of getting as much out of them as possible? How will you deal with it when your supervisor has a different view of this than you do? As you will discover in this text, learning about relating and our relationships plays an important part of the love of wisdom. There are the issues of market analysis. Do you trust the pundits? Do you study the charts? Do you listen to your intuition? The questions of how we know and where we find our sources of wisdom are especially significant for forecasting? And what do you think about time? Our use of time is a unique gauge of what we think is important in life. What might a beautiful day at the office look like?

Perhaps you are studying education or social services. In these fields you deal with people asking questions (or perhaps you are helping them learn to ask questions). You face the complexities of peoples’ lives. Why can’t Johnny read? What is behind the violence in this family? You must be able to consider multiple factors at once. You face the issues of society:

how is a well-ordered community best formed? And, of course, you will deal with peoples' sufferings (as with the nursing field). Lots of questions and concerns come up when people suffer. It is often not until we suffer that we ask about the meaning of life. Those who live with the sufferings of others come face to face with the larger issues of life: others lives and their own life. How we live our lives and how we understand our suffering are inextricably intertwined.

The study of philosophy has much to offer. The practice of philosophy as a love of wisdom has even more to offer. When we learn to love wisdom, we notice why we live the way we do. We see the connections between habits and history, values and questions, loves and life. We are able to doubt when doubting is needed and to trust when trusting is needed, for we have considered the nature of doubt and trust. Those who love wisdom are in the process of re-evaluating life's most fundamental values, the things that are most important to us. And having evaluated these values, the wise find practical ways to embody those values in everything they do. The aim of this text is to help make each of these steps possible for you.

On Getting and Giving Wisdom: The Story of Plato's Cave

One thing you will be doing throughout this text is reading samples of what are considered some of the "wisest" writings in world history. You will read these samples a first time as they appear in a given chapter. But I will return to them again later in the text. So you will do well to read carefully from the start.

Our sample for this chapter is a story about getting and giving wisdom. It was written by Plato, a thinker and statesman who lived in Greece somewhere around 428-348 bce. Plato's *Republic* is one of the most well-known works of philosophy in the West. In this work, Plato considers the question of how a government ought best to be structured. In the process, however, he explores the nature of the human soul, the character of education and much more. Plato wrote in the style of a "dialogue," kind-of like a play, where people ask questions and respond to one another. This particular excerpt is a conversation between the wise Socrates (the "I" in the story - Socrates was actually Plato's teacher and Plato's Socratic dialogues reflect, more or less, the

views of his mentor) and the younger Glaucon. Socrates is providing Glaucon with an analogy of a “cave” which he uses to talk about the acquisition of wisdom (what he calls education or ‘enlightenment’), about issues of education, and about the consequences of his theories for the politics of his day. First, Socrates describes a picture of a cave. Follow along with your imagination as he presents this picture (you may want to refer to Figure 1.1, which gives a simplified visual representation of Socrates’ picture -- and just another note: the sun in Plato’s day was not only considered a light-giving object in the sky, but was also considered divine. So the sun is called “he”).

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: — Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

I see.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

That is certain.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, — what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, — will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Far truer.

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see, and

which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

True, he said.

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he 's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

Not all in a moment, he said.

He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Certainly.

Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.

Certainly.

He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.

And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

Certainly, he would.

Now you have a picture of the cave and of the consequences of release from the cave into the light. In the cave one only sees shadows and imagines these shadows to be reality itself. Upon release, the prisoner turns around and sees reality for what it is. One cannot describe to another prisoner what light is like. One must undergo a gradual process of transfer from the prison, to seeing the object which produced the shadows, to crawling out of the cave, and to the gradual improvement of sight above ground, until one finally contemplates the very nature of the divine sun itself. But what does this image have to do with wisdom and the government? Socrates goes on to explain. First he explains how this analogy relates to his understanding of knowledge, wisdom, and enlightenment.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument [earlier in Plato's dialogue]; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you.

For Socrates (and for Plato, who is writing this dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon), the life which is ordinarily lived is a life in shadows, a life of illusion wherein we see only what the earthly or physical sun illumines. The journey towards wisdom, toward enlightenment, then, is an arduous journey towards what Plato calls “the intellectual world” at the end of which one finds “the idea of good,” the source of all other value. For Plato, the physical world is only temporary and is of little ultimate importance. The intellectual world is eternal and really real. Our aim should be set towards the “idea of good” (the invisible, but very real, standard which governs all other standards -- good thinking is *truth*, good acting is *right*, good arrangement is *beauty* and so on). But, as Socrates argues, this journey is hard and learning to become used to this intellectual world is painful. At times we would feel more comfortable back with the shadows. But it’s not really the *real* world, is it?

And what of those who are, in the end, enlightened? What is their role in life, and how are they to relate to the others down in the shadows? Should they remain up above merely contemplating the beauties of the intellectual world, or do they have a service to provide society as a whole? Socrates goes on to address this in the following passage:

Moreover, I said, you must not wonder that those who attain to this beatific vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell; which desire of theirs is very natural, if our allegory may be trusted.

Yes, very natural. . . .

Then, I said, the business of us who are the founders of the State will be to compel the best minds to attain that knowledge which we have already shown to be the greatest of all — they must continue to ascend until they arrive at the good; but when they have ascended and seen enough we must not allow them to do as they do now.

What do you mean?

I mean that they remain in the upper world: but this must not be allowed; they must be made to descend again among the prisoners in the den, and partake of their labours and honours, whether they are worth having or not.

But is not this unjust? he said; ought we to give them a worse life, when they might have a better?

You have again forgotten, my friend, I said, the intention of the legislator, who did not aim at making any one class in the State happy above the rest; the happiness was to be in the whole State, and he held the citizens together by persuasion and necessity, making them benefactors of the State, and therefore benefactors of one another; to this end he created them, not to please themselves, but to be his instruments in binding up the State.

What did you learn from this reading about philosophy? Stop and think about this for a moment. One thing you may have noticed is that reading (and understanding) philosophical writing takes a fair amount of imagination. You have to hesitate in your reading and picture the universe that is being described. In this case you first have to picture the story itself: the cave, the wall(s), the fire, the ascent, and the sun. You have to imagine what it feels like to have your entire reality made of shadows, only to discover that they have all along been indeed that, only shadows.

Then, you have to imagine the *point* of the story. You have to see humanity as prisoners of our own ignorance, assuming the things we see are real when really they are mere shadows of Reality, Good, Beauty. You must identify with Socrates' vision of the hard struggle to reach the light, the struggle to free ourselves from illusion and see the Truth. Then you must put yourself in Plato's place and see the significance of their view of enlightenment for the structuring of society. Plato is well-known for his belief that society should be run by philosopher-kings. Why do you think Plato believes this, based on what you have read? What do you think of Plato's

idea? How are a view of the way things are and the practices of individuals and societies brought together in this writing? Allow yourself the freedom to imagine. Learn to “play” with the images and ideas of the text. Try to put yourself in the place of the person writing the sample. If you learn to do this you will understand philosophy much clearer--and you will have a lot more fun doing it

The Basic Elements of Philosophy as a Love of Wisdom

As lovers of wisdom--those who synthesize action and reflection--we find ourselves dealing with a variety of stuff: our own contexts, our sources of wisdom, the skills we use to evaluate or integrate thought and life, our beliefs, our guiding values, our own sense who we are, our daily practices and more. While I will provide an overview of how these elements tend to fit together in the next chapter, it might help to briefly mention them here as we close this chapter to give you a feel of where we will be going, since each part of this text will focus on one or more of these basic elements.

In the first part of this text, we learn about our contexts and our sources of wisdom. We reflect on the givens of our birth, the journeys of our lives, and the conditions in which we find ourselves. We acknowledge who and what has shaped us. We recognize those forces that we allow to influence us today. As I mentioned, in the next chapter we will also learn about this whole affair of examining one’s life.

In the second part, we will focus on the skills of wisdom. If you remember, we defined wisdom as *an expertise in the art of living*. And as with any expertise, or any art, there are certain skills that are necessary. We will focus on three of these: paying attention, asking questions, and putting things into practice.

In the third part of this text, we will explore the beliefs and values (the larger issues) which are constantly present to the wise. This is the part of the book that most resembles traditional philosophy textbooks. Here we will ask such questions as:

- What do we mean when we say something? How do thought and speech relate? How do we clarify good reasons for believing in something? (Language and Logic)
- What is “knowledge”? How do (or can) we know? (Epistemology)
- What is “real”? How do we distinguish between mental/spiritual and physical realities? (Metaphysics)
- How should human beings conduct themselves? Is there such a thing as “good” or “right” actions, and if so how are they to be determined? (Ethics)
- Is there some sort of Reality (or Realities) transcending everything, some sort of Ultimate or god/gods? How are we to understand the relationship between careful reasoning and religious faith? (Philosophy of Religion)
- What is “beauty”? What makes something beautiful, excellent, or desirable to us? How does that affect our lives? (Aesthetics)
- What is “justice”? How is a society to be best ordered? (Politics)

In the final part of this text, we will examine the practices of our lives: the way we take care of ourselves, the ways we use our time and money, the ways we approach our jobs, our community, our sufferings, and more. In this section we will see how our beliefs and guiding values shape the way we live, and we will explore practical means to bring harmony between our values and our practice of life. Throughout this text you will find Journal Assignments to help you work through your own philosophy and life of wisdom. The time you spend leisurely working through these assignments will reap great rewards. Who knows, perhaps, you will be considered a Master some day?

Journal Assignment 1.1: Finding Wisdom

Your exercise for this chapter is to consider what it might mean to be wise. But to find wisdom, you will have to go on a quest.

1. First, look in your own life. Who is wise? See if you can name five people, books, groups, or the like, that you would consider “wise.” Are there a few that really stand above all the rest? Why? What do you think wisdom is all about? Write your reflections on a sheet of paper.

2. Second, look at your circle of relationships. Talk to five people and interview them about the subject of wisdom (a wider range of people will make this part of the assignment more interesting). Ask them, “Who is wise in your estimation?” “Why do you call them wise?” “What do you think wisdom is?” List names of those interviewed and summarize what you learn from the surveys on your journal sheet. What do people think about wisdom?

3. Third, look in a dictionary. Look up the word “wisdom.” Also look up the terms, “knowledge,” “expertise,” and “skill.” How does “wisdom” differ from these other terms? What is distinctive about wisdom? Again summarize your insights in your journal sheet.

4. Finally look around the world (and the world wide web). Use some kind of search engine and explore the nature of wisdom. You might want to play with this a bit (try Google: “wisdom, music,” or “foolish”). Just surf around and see what you learn about wisdom. Once again, list the web sites visited and summarize your insights in your journal.

5. Finally, put it all together. What do you conclude about the nature of wisdom?

Resources:

Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Translated by Michael Chase. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

-----, "Spiritual Exercises." In *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, translated by Michael Chase, 81–125. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.