



Emotions and Practical Wisdom

Robert C. Roberts

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 5th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 5th – Saturday 7th January 2017.

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ROBERT C. ROBERTS

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

Introduction

Practical wisdom is the knowledge of what it means to live well and the disposition to use this knowledge in the service of actually living well. It is itself a moral virtue. Since all the virtues are dispositions to live a properly human life, practical wisdom is a capacity to judge well in matters to which the other virtues are applicable—thus to judge well of situations that call the virtue of justice into play, or compassion, courage, or generosity, to see what needs to be done or abstained from in such situations, and to know how to act if the virtues are to be exemplified. It is the capacity to judge of people well, including oneself, to recognize them, by their actions, words, and emotional expressions, as having or lacking the virtues; and it is to know what it would take, in the way of different actions, words, and emotions, for those who fall short of the virtues to measure up. It is also the knowledge of what *produces* the virtues in people—of how to rear virtuous children, how to encourage goodness in one's family, friends, and colleagues, and how to improve oneself. Thus practical wisdom is a power, or range of powers, of judgment and perception and action that are essential to higher-level pursuit of the moral life.

Since no virtue can be possessed without having some powers of discrimination, practical wisdom, or parts of it, are presupposed for the possession of any virtue. In some cases this may involve little in the way of reasoning. It may be a more purely perceptual capacity. For example, a just person sometimes exemplifies justice without deliberating much or at all about how to approach the situations in which she most distinctly exemplify her justice. Yet her justice involves discriminating construal of situations. Perhaps she feels the injustice of her not feeling grateful to someone who has bestowed a great kindness on her. Though this feeling comes on her when she puts the coldness of her heart together with the kindness of her benefactor, she doesn't deliberate about whether her coldness is just or unjust. It just comes to her that this combination is unjust. She sees the injustice of the combination in much the way a person who is sensitive to color combinations sees that two colors go badly together.

Our question is about how the powers of moral discrimination that constitute practical wisdom are connected to emotions and emotion

dispositions. I note **three** such connections. **First**, the perceptions most perfectly characteristic of practical wisdom, whether results of deliberation or spontaneous intuitions of how things morally are, are themselves emotions. **Second**, practical wisdom is a power of judging emotions—one's own and other people's. In relation to one's own emotions, practical wisdom is a way of getting distance from them and a presupposition of any effort to correct them. It is an ability to recognize emotions as morally fit or unfit and to understand what is right or wrong about them. It is an ability to objectify oneself that is essential to full moral development. Yet this objectification, insofar as it is paradigmatically moral, is also emotional. In relation to other people's emotions, practical wisdom turns to a large extent on sympathy, which in turn depends on a breadth of emotional dispositions in oneself and good powers of assessment of emotions. And **third**, practical wisdom is a knowledge of what to do to correct morally adverse emotions and to confirm oneself in morally appropriate ones, and the motivation to do so. These three connections of emotions and practical wisdom interact with one another and bring practical wisdom in special connection with other types of virtues.

Emotions as a Basis of Practical Wisdom

Actions are not the only kind of thing that takes moral predicates. Actions may be despicable, culpable, honest, generous, just, compassionate, cruel. But also, *people* can be kind, silly, cunning, courageous, admirable. *Situations* (social arrangements) can be just or unjust, and in an extended sense situations (social and non-social) can be cruel or kind. A person may have a foolish or generous *desire*, a kind or cruel *emotion*, without being, on the whole, a foolish or generous, kind or cruel, person.

The "perception" of actions, characters, situations, desires, and emotions is not just in terms of moral *categories*, in the sense that a person is practically wise if she can correctly identify these qualities in things. (Such might be learned in a college class on critical moral thinking that left the student as poorly educated in moral perception as she was before she took the class.) In addition to correctness of category-assignment and the reasoning associated with it, the person of practical wisdom has to perceive, as we might say, the "values" involved in what is perceived, to see the urgencies and importances, goodnesses and badnesses, delightfulnesses and lamentablenesses, rights and wrongs of the situation and its possibilities. The practically wise person not only correctly classifies instances of injustice, but is struck by their deplorableness; she not only recognizes a compassionate act or person when she sees one, but sees the moral beauty in it or him. That is, in addition to correct categorization, the practically wise

person must *appreciate moral import*, and this too is part of her perceptual powers.

Clearly enough, this perception is not sense-perception (though some sense-perception may be involved in it), since qualities like despicable, empathic, culpable, honest, foolish, admirable, generous, and the like, are not sensory qualities like red, green, light, dark, loud, soft, high and low (pitched), sweet, sour, etc. An utterance's being honest is a different *kind* of property than its being loud, and it takes more than ears to pick it up. Foolishness is a different *kind* of property of a person than being light-skinned and short; foolishness is not a visual property, though it can be perceived as clearly as skin color and height by a person of practical wisdom. What is this perception like?

The emotions that are generated by the passional virtues are the clearest and most intense form of the perceptions basic to practical wisdom. A person who really cares to see justice done will very vividly see in his anger about some injustice the true colors of the unjust agent at whom he directs his anger. If he himself is the unjust one, it will be in the emotion of guilt based on his concern for justice that he perceives his own culpability in its moral significance. In the emotion of compassion the wise woman sees with ideal vivacity the moral bearing of another's suffering. In the feeling of admiration for a generous personality the person of practical wisdom sees the worthiness of this character and his trait. This is how, in general, practical wisdom depends on the passional virtues. These virtues are concerns about various kinds of moral issues/objects: truth, justice, suffering, patria, friends, family, others' wellbeing. These concerns generate emotions in situations to which they are relevant, and the emotions are the perceptions that most vivaciously exemplify practical wisdom. The emotions based on these concerns are perceptions of the situations in their moral aspects.

Practical wisdom is in part an ability to deliberate well about situations and people, and even one's own emotions and desires, so as to come to a judgment or a decision about what to do. We deliberate about how to feel and what to desire; we mull over some situation or person or state of ourselves to come to a settled feeling about it. What is the role of emotions in such processes of moral deliberation? Traditionally, philosophers have stressed emotions' role as obstructors of good deliberation. Emotions blind us, discourage us, distract us, derail us from effective moral deliberation. This is no doubt true, but such emotions as admiration, fear, hope, reverence, and anger may also help us, if they are well formed and occur in a person with relevant other virtues: they render salient features of the situation that

would otherwise have gone unnoticed; they move us to persevere in deliberation. Admiration for a football hero may make a teenager heedless of his parents' good advice, but moral admiration for a genuinely heroic mentor may move the disciple to notice attitudes in himself that he would otherwise have missed, subject them to scrutiny, and thus find himself wanting. Fear of unwelcome truth can deter us from good deliberation, but a healthy fear of error may move us to persevere in our investigations. Anger about an injustice can blind us to factors that may mitigate the guilt of its perpetrator, but if it is accompanied by a wise awareness of its blinding effect, it can also energize us for deliberation and concentrate the mind, and so yield a more careful process and fairer verdict.

Emotions as Assessed Through Practical Wisdom

In the last section I argued that emotions are central to practical wisdom in being the most vivid form of moral perception, and as motivations to the deliberation that is characteristic of practical wisdom. Some such deliberation is not only motivated by emotion, but directed at emotions. This last function of emotion in practical wisdom presupposes that emotions, like any other kind of perception, can be distorted and misleading. Accordingly, the person of virtue has resources for correcting emotions. Practical wisdom is one of these.

As *Oliver Twist* and the doctor Mr. Losberne drive toward London to find Mr. Brownlow, Oliver recognizes the house from which the attempted burglary of the Maylies was carried out. In a passion to corroborate Oliver's story of the burglary, and perhaps correct an injustice or two while he's at it, Mr. Losberne acts quite foolishly:

...before the coachman could dismount from his box, [Mr. Losberne] had tumbled out of the coach, by some means or other; and, running down to the deserted tenement, began kicking at the door like a madman.

He rouses a wrathful little hunchback to the door, but accomplishes nothing of his purpose. The encounter is fruitless, unpleasant, and dangerous. In retrospect,

'I am an ass!' said the doctor, after a long silence. 'Did you know that before, Oliver?'

'No, sir.'

'Then don't forget it another time.'

'An ass,' said the doctor again, after a further silence of some minutes. 'Even if it had been the right place, and the right fellows had been there, what could I have done, single-handed? And if I had had

assistance, I see no good that I should have done, except leading to my own exposure, and an unavoidable statement of the manner in which I have hushed up this business. That would have served me right, though I am always involving myself in some scrape or other, by acting on impulse. It might have done me good.'

Dickens comments:

Now, the fact was that the excellent doctor had never acted upon anything but impulse all through his life, and it was no bad compliment to the nature of the impulses which governed him, that so far from being involved in any peculiar troubles or misfortunes, he had the warmest respect and esteem of all who knew him.

Mr. Losberne's character invites us to make some distinctions. My main point in the preceding section was that some emotions are a basis of practical wisdom in the sense that they are themselves a vivid form of moral perception. When Mr. Losberne sees that he has before him the very house in which the robbery of the Maylies was hatched, he is delighted, filled with the hope of righting injustice and vindicating Oliver's word. This is a noble emotion, arising out of the virtue of justice. It is a way of perceiving in the situation a particular moral significance and opportunity. A man of fainter moral enthusiasm would have been less likely to notice it. Analogous hopes and delights, in other situations, would be perfectly fitting, from a moral point of view, to *act* on; and even in the present one the perception contains moral truth. This situation *does* hold opportunity to right injustices and vindicate Oliver's word, even if the doctor's way of exploiting this opportunity was misconceived. So Losberne has the dimension of practical wisdom I spoke of in the last section—a sharp and impassioned eye for moral significance. But he certainly lacks something in the way of practical wisdom, as he himself acknowledges.

Losberne's defect is that he is practically indiscriminate about his impulses. He doesn't monitor or regulate them sufficiently. Instead, he often simply lives in their terms, accepting their perceptual deliverances uncritically and doing their bidding without caution. He lacks independence of his impulses, a power of taking a distance from them that is also a part of the moral personality. Because of the excellence of his impulses, he manages in spite of this to be a good man. Thus he's a very different character from Richard Savage, who by Samuel Johnson's account was as uncritical of his impulses as Losberne, but had trivial, childish, sensual, and petty impulses—and thus lacked practical wisdom in *both* of the dimensions that we are discussing.

This second dimension of practical wisdom is the ability and disposition to stand back from our emotions to assess them. It is a knowledge of emotions, knowledge of their powers to move and to deceive. It is an ability to distinguish good from evil emotions, and genuine emotion from sham feeling, to discern the fittingness of emotion to situation and of emotional expression to situation. It is understanding something of where emotions come from and especially how they relate to the character of their subject—what they are symptoms of, and how. It is circumspection about allowing behavioral manifestations of one’s emotions. Practical wisdom, in Losberne’s situation, would be manifested in the judgment, as it were, *This excitement could carry me into useless danger*. In other contexts, practical wisdom is an awareness of how fear can lead to dishonesty, and a disposition to recognize such fears in oneself (and others). It is a sensitivity to propriety and impropriety in emotions—to the evil in malicious joy and the goodness of weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. It is a knowledge of the tricks that our feelings can play on us, the volatility of our moods and the way they are influenced by caffeine, alcohol, sleep deprivation, recent reading, dramatic depictions, and other factors. It is an ability to distinguish “emotions” of the moment, that have been triggered by such factors, from emotions that are more deeply rooted in our loves and commitments.¹

Practical wisdom, in the dimension I am now expounding, is a moral objectivity about one’s emotions, an ability to objectify them so as to make judgments and notice things about them, to adopt a point of view that may differ from that of the emotions themselves. What is the character of this independence of practical wisdom from the emotions? A dominant tradition has classified practical wisdom as a virtue of the intellect, and thinking of the intellect as a power separate from the seat of the emotions seems to offer an explanation of this independence. As long as we don’t demarcate the intellect too mechanically or exclusively from the emotions, this seems to be the right way to think about the matter. The judgments and recognitions that I’ve been talking about are functions of our powers of conceptualization—our ability to think systematically about our moral and mental life, even if none of us thinks *completely* systematically here, and the thinking of many is an inarticulate, osmotically acquired, intuitive sort of thinking.

But the fact that the emotions themselves have a point of view that might be called into question by the intellect suggests that the intellect and the emotions are not separated by an *ontological* gulf; they do not belong to

¹ Cite Alfano.

separate “faculties.” Emotions contain intellect (they have a mind of their own that they have usually acquired at least partially by informal conceptual training) and the intellect contains emotion, at least as intellect is represented in the dimension of practical wisdom that evaluates emotions. When Mr. Losberne tells Oliver “I am an ass!” this critical assessment of his emotional response is no doubt an act of intellect, but it is also dismay and regret. And without the dismay and regret—something introducing evaluation or motivation into the judgment—the judgment would not be a deliverance of practical wisdom. The man whose judgment *This excitement could carry me into useless danger* moves him not to act on his impulse experiences a mild form of fear (we might call it caution). The woman who judges her malicious joy to be despicable, in the way characteristic of practical wisdom, experiences something like repugnance, dismay, or contrition. The perceptions and judgments of practical wisdom are always morally interested ones.

Sympathy

I have been arguing that practical wisdom is, among other things, a power of morally understanding emotions that is itself “emotional.” In the last section I concentrated on the wise person’s understanding of her own emotions; in this one I look at her understanding of other people’s. What *kind* of understanding of others’ emotions is characteristic of practical wisdom, and what personal qualifications are required to have this understanding?

The person of practical wisdom knows and notices about the emotions of others many of the kinds of things she knows and notices about her own. She recognizes others’ emotions (even when they don’t); she sees whether the emotion is morally good, bad, or neutral; she knows the implications of people’s emotions for their character; and what behavior is likely to follow from them. Sympathy is a regular ingredient in this dimension of practical wisdom. What is this sympathy and how does it function in the judgments and perceptions of the person of practical wisdom?

Sympathy is an appreciation of others’ emotions (as it is of their interests, desires, and behavior) that arises from the presence of similar interests (and, consequently, potential emotions) in the one who understands. Sympathy is not the only basis of understanding others’ emotions, since the practically wise person frequently understands the other’s emotions better than the other himself does. Thus she has an objectivity about the other’s emotions similar to her objectivity about her own; she not only knows what it’s like to feel that way, but has it in her to explain and assess those feelings

from a moral standpoint. Thus the word ‘sympathy’ has a special sense as I use it here. It doesn’t imply *approval* of the other’s mental states, as when we say “I sympathize with your feelings about the new government.” It means, rather, the ability to enter imaginatively into the other’s attitude so as to understand it in a personal way. In this sense of ‘sympathy’ the practically wise person is defined, in part, by her wide sympathies, and is able to recognize, in the affective states of others, many reflections of herself, even when the emotions in question are ones from which she would dissociate herself, if she noticed them occurring in her, as she well might. Let us consider a case from literature.

At the end of Henry James’s *The Europeans*, Felix and Gertrude, with a growing chorus of young people, try to persuade Mr. Wentworth to assent to the marriage of Felix, the spontaneously joyous bohemian painter, and Mr. Wentworth’s daughter Gertrude, the girl whose sweet, dull eyes have been brightened by Felix’s attentions and his infectious aspirations for adventure. Mr. Wentworth is bewildered by the others’ enthusiasm for the marriage, and his failure is grounded in the peculiarity of his moral interest. He is a duty-monomaniac; his highly developed sense of duty overwhelms or severely colors any other interests he may have, including such virtues as familial affection, justice, and truthfulness. Because of this narrowness of interest, he is a man of narrow sympathies. He doesn’t understand Gertrude’s enthusiasm for adventure, her appreciation of charm and gaiety, and the joy and hope that the others feel in the prospect of her union with Felix. Gaiety, charm, and adventure don’t strike Mr. Wentworth as particularly good things, and so he can’t understand their seeming good to others. All he can see of the good life is duty, and so he is really not in a position, psychologically, to make moral assessments of the attitudes of people with other interests. He is inclined to judge them harshly, but the sheer numbers on the other side check this judgment and lead him to judge, instead, that there is something here he doesn’t understand.

Why is wideness of sympathy associated with wisdom, and narrowness with foolishness? —Because wideness of sympathy allows one to understand more, and the *more* means *deeper* understanding, morally deeper. We can imagine Mr. Wentworth feeling sympathy for another father and head of family whose world of duties and the regularities of upright living had been upset by the introduction of frivolous outsiders into his midst. This he can understand, because it is within the range of his experience, and above all of his concerns. He might say to the other father, “I know just how you must feel.” But because of his narrow sympathies, he will fail to notice other things about this man’s emotions that a person of

wider sympathies would notice—for example, how narrow this man’s character is, and how little he understands. So we will not credit Mr. Wentworth with practical wisdom, even though he does have a certain emotional sensitivity in virtue of his limited sympathy.

To say that Mr. Wentworth lacks sympathy, and the wisdom of which it is a necessary part, is not to say that he fails to notice Gertrude’s emotions, nor even that he cannot identify them; *perhaps* he could even tell you that she is indignant about having been stifled and regarded by her family as standing in special need of moral surveillance and reform. But in a sense he doesn’t know where Gertrude’s emotion is coming from. The concern to be expressive, to be free, to be herself, that is contravened by his arrangements, is foreign to him, is not in himself, in his own repertoire of concerns; or if it is there, it isn’t one he is willing to access on her behalf. Sympathy requires not only a concern, on the part of the understander, similar to the one that is at the basis of the discerned emotion in another, but also something like concern, or good will, *for the other*. The exercise of sympathy may require an active effort of imagination by which you enter the other’s mind, searching for analogies in your own experience; and this concern for the other, or openness to or interest in the life of the other, motivates this exercise of imagination. You may perhaps also exercise sympathy for, and thus emotional understanding of, another not so much through interest in the other, but out of a sense of duty.

Mr. Wentworth’s moral understanding would have been enriched by a broader experience, perhaps acquired through intercourse with a wider variety of human beings, but also perhaps by the reading of novels or biographies. How would such exposure have remedied the deficiency of moral *concerns* that makes his sympathy so narrow, his understanding so meagre? Can broader experience, actual or imagined, enlarge the range of what one cares about? The answer is an obvious Yes. This is a main function of a liberal education. It is not just to pack the mind with information, geographical, historical, cultural, social scientific, etc., or a lot of plots of novels and plays, and theories of economics and psychology. The deeper goal is rather to make a person wise, and this, I am arguing, involves engendering a certain love of many things, a breadth of interests, and thus of sympathies. The loves, it seems, are engendered by contact, by acquaintance. Human nature contains something generic that can be trusted, more or less, to emerge into active love when a sufficiently lovely object is placed before it, in an appropriate light. Thus a liberal education is an introduction to justice and peace and beauty, and excellences of all kinds, human and natural, an introduction designed to call forth enthusiasm for these things.

Being a formation in interests, such an education is a training in emotions, and thus in a broad human sympathy.

But the person of practical wisdom doesn't approve all the emotions she understands sympathetically. The wise reader of *Madame Bovary* understands Emma's decadent and foolish enthusiasms, and thus her emotions, better than Emma herself understands them, and the *disapproval*—the emotional perception of this decadence—is essential to such understanding. Thus the wise reader's emotional dispositions necessarily do *not* match Emma's, and we might wonder what role sympathy plays in this understanding. But sympathy, as I define it here, operates in the understanding even of emotions with which, in one sense, the understander can't "sympathize." We can imagine that Mr. Wentworth, confronted with Emma, would be simply befuddled, being unable to find enough in himself that resonates with Emma's interests and outlook. By contrast, the person of practical wisdom, though critical of Emma's affections, will know pretty well what it's like to feel as she does. This access to her mind is based not only in the broad experience that I mentioned above, but also in acquaintance with the seamier side of one's own mind and heart, past and present. I argued earlier that the practically wise person typically recognizes emotions in herself from which she dissociates for moral reasons. My point now is that both such recognition and such dissociation² serve her well in her understanding of other people, and are thus an important foundation of practical wisdom.

Know-How Respecting Emotions

I have suggested that, first, emotions are a *basis* of practical wisdom inasmuch as they are the paradigmatic kind of moral perception and move us to moral deliberation. Second, practical wisdom is *directed at* emotions, both one's own and other people's; no one can be practically wise without understanding emotions. A third dimension of practical wisdom in its connection with emotions is built on these last two: it is know-how or skill in the *management* of emotions.

As its name implies, practical wisdom is not just an idling power of perception and judgment, but is embedded in activity. In our roles of spouse, friend, parent, co-worker, educator, and even in passing acquaintances, our understanding of our own and other people's emotions needs to issue in actions and omissions that affect emotional response and thus the character

² A widening of one's sympathies is one of the benefits of a regular discipline of honest self-examination.

and quality of these relationships. We need to anticipate the emotional impact of our words and gestures, read the emotional responses of our fellows, know how to come across as it is wisest to do, know how to calm or arouse our interlocutor. In interaction with our children, and even with spouse or friends, we may have our eye on the longer range effect of the emotions we display and elicit on the character of the other and our relationship with him or her. The morally upbuilding effect of good friendships depends in significant measure on the emotional interactions—pleasant *and* unpleasant—that characterize the friendship. As we deal with our children, the selective use of humor to dispel tensions, discernment about the impact of anger and the right moment for a gesture of forgiveness, and the choice of the right moment and tone for expressions of approval or disapproval—all of these and more call for practical wisdom that is as much a matter of know-how or skill as it is of accurate perception and thought.

The practically wise person is not only skilled at managing the emotions of others for their good and the common good; she is also skilled at managing her own emotions. The Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet records a moment when she turned unseemly grief into proper hope and joy by skillful self-management. She describes a harrowing summer night on which her house burned down, carrying to ashes all that it contained. She knows immediately how to think of the event in Christian terms:

And when I could no longer look,
I blest His name that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust.
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just.
It was His own, it was not mine,
Far be it that I should repine;

In the following days, however, she sorrows over her loss:

When by the ruins oft I passed
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast,
And here and there the places spy
Where oft I sat and long did lie:
Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,
There lay that store I counted best.
My pleasant things in ashes lie,
And them behold no more shall I.
Under thy roof no guest shall sit,
Nor at thy table eat a bit.
No pleasant tale shall e'er be told,
Nor things recounted done of old.

But then, assessing this emotion as unworthy by the standard of Christian wisdom, and, we may guess, anxious of herself that she might continue in it, thus confirming a degenerate character, she takes action against herself.

Then straight I 'gin my heart to chide,
 And did thy wealth on earth abide?
 Didst fix thy hope on mold'ring dust?
 The arm of flesh didst make thy trust?
 Raise up thy thoughts above the sky
 That dunghill mists away may fly.
 Thou hast an house on high erect,
 Framed by that mighty Architect,
 With glory richly furnished,
 Stands permanent though this be fled.
 It's purchased and paid for too
 By Him who hath enough to do.
 A price so vast as is unknown
 Yet by His gift is made thine own;
 There's wealth enough, I need no more,
 Farewell, my pelf, farewell my store.
 The world no longer let me love,
 My hope and treasure lies above.

Her action consists of self-diagnosis in a sort of ironic Christian self-mockery, along with reminders of what is really important. Her sorrow comes from setting her hope on “mold'ring dust” and letting her thoughts about life be clouded by the steam of “dunghills.” She reminds herself of the real treasure that God has given her in the death of Christ, by comparison with which the importance of her chest and trunk and table fades to nothing. Notice that both the assessment of the unseemly emotion and the strategy for replacing it with a better one come from the wisdom of Bradstreet's moral tradition. Clearly, this is a wisdom that is very “practical” in her case, as she puts it to actual use in self-oversight and self-regulation.

Practical Wisdom and Philosophical Wisdom

The possibility of a moral wisdom that isn't practical is a theme to which Samuel Johnson recurs in his *Lives of the English Poets*. For example he says of Joseph Addison,

He had read with critical eyes the important volume of human life,
 and knew the heart of man from the depths of stratagem to the surface
 of affectation.

That is a description of moral wisdom as I have treated it here. But Addison's understanding was rather too purely philosophical, as we may gather from the following:

From the coffee-house he went again to a tavern, where he often sat late and drank too much wine. In the bottle discontent seeks for comfort, cowardice for courage, and bashfulness for confidence. It is not unlikely that Addison was first seduced to excess by the manumission which he obtained from the servile timidity of his sober hours. He that feels oppression from the presence of those to whom he knows himself superior will desire to set loose his powers of conversation; and who that ever asked succour from Bacchus was able to preserve himself from being enslaved by his auxiliary?

Johnson's analytical comments on Addison's emotional life show wisdom, but guarantee no more practicality of it than Addison's own, for Addison himself might have made the same observations. Of Richard Savage, Johnson says,

he disregarded all considerations that opposed his present passions, and...readily...hazarded all future advantages for any immediate gratifications. Whatever was his predominant inclination, neither hope nor fear hindered him from complying with it; nor had opposition any other effect than to heighten his ardour, and irritate his vehemence.

Of this same man he remarks a few paragraphs later,

His judgement was eminently exact both with regard to writings and to men. The knowledge of life was indeed his chief attainment....

Philosophical (ethical) wisdom can be defined as the articulation of, or facility with, ideas that can form the basis of practical wisdom. I say "*can* form," because this articulateness about the human heart is distressingly independent of practical wisdom, as the examples from Johnson suggest. Not only are some wise philosophers practical fools; some people are sensitive novel readers, able to appreciate the emotional subtleties of Emma Bovary and Rodya Raskolnikov, yet are angered and frightened by trivialities, driven by passions of the moment, and regularly deceive themselves about what moves them. They are low on the passion virtues and, most likely, the virtues of will power as well, and thus lack *practical* wisdom. On the other side, some individuals may have good understanding of their own hearts and the hearts of others without being very articulate themselves, and without much aid from philosophers and poets.

I try to answer two related questions in this section. First, what makes moral wisdom practical? How does an intellectually idling sort of wisdom

differ from one that takes root in the personality? And second, what does the detachability of moral wisdom from the personality imply about the usefulness of philosophical ethics? Can moral philosophy make people better, and if so, under what conditions does it tend to do so? I hope that the earlier parts of this lecture will provide clues to answer these questions.

First, moral wisdom's practicality derives from its being *integrated into the emotions*. If someone like Savage knows, with some delicacy, wherein true happiness resides, so that he can *write* clearly and beautifully about it, yet *lives*, himself, in very different categories, a chief reason for this must be that he doesn't love what he knows to be good, or loves some competitor more. He rejoices, perhaps, more in his fine turns of phrase and the neatness of his penetrating thoughts about duty, than in being a doer of his duty. He is more angered about not being recognized for his wisdom than he is about actual injustices done to his friends and others. He is more appalled by a loss of income than by a shortfall of his virtue. To say that his wisdom is doing no moral work in his life is to say that it is not shaping his real concerns, and thus his emotions. As we've seen, this emotional integration is at two levels—at that of his perceptual responses to situations and persons other than himself, and at the reflective level of his perceptions of himself (his behavior, emotions, desires). At each level, wise emotion moves the agent toward wise action—in the one case toward action in the world, and in the other toward self-regulation.

Second, the practically wise agent is not only moved *toward* such action; he actually *takes*, and takes regularly, both kinds of wise actions. Such actions integrate wisdom into the moral personality in several ways. First, they subtly deepen the understanding through giving the agent first-hand experience of the moral life. The person who acts in appropriate and perhaps even heroic ways will differ in his wisdom from someone who has learned his wisdom through reading philosophers and novelists, and writing learned papers. The two kinds of experiential background result in subtly different patterns of salience, even for two people who belong to the same moral tradition and would agree on all points of moral doctrine. Second, actions confirm and regulate the agent's emotions. Acting on compassion, for example, will over the longer haul tend make one's compassion less sentimental, while at the same time confirming it. These changes occur through the sense of oneself that is developed in the actions and in the responses of those toward whom one acts compassionately. Inevitably the compassionate person will sometimes be exploited, and so will become more discriminating; he will learn from the ingratitude of some he genuinely helps not to depend on such rewards; from the response of others he will

learn the importance and joy of helping. Third, action begets skill, and skill is another way that wisdom is integrated into the personality. When Anne Bradstreet turns her grief to hope by skillful use of Christian wisdom, she does so not in a historical vacuum, but presumably against a background of habitual practices of emotional self-regulation. As she practices the wise control of anger, pride, envy, guilt, and illicit joys, she gets better at such action, and the wisdom in terms of which she performs it approaches to second nature.

If philosophical wisdom is as detachable from the moral personality as I've been suggesting, can moral philosophy make people better? And if it can, under what conditions does it tend to do so? I have said that philosophical wisdom is the articulation of ideas that can form the basis of practical wisdom. So the question about the usefulness of philosophical wisdom is really the question about the moral usefulness of careful thought and formulation of thought about the shape of the moral life. If a person is emotionally well disposed to be generous, but not fully clear on the exact place of self-interest and self-sacrifice in the virtue of generosity, it would seem that he might become a practically wiser person through thinking out carefully the grammar of generosity or having a philosopher explain it to him. It might increase his ability to discriminate in himself truly generous motives from ones that are not so but might be taken for generous by a less wise person. And by increasing this discernment he might become a better self-manager and consequently (eventually) a more generous person. Such philosophy might help him become a better moral teacher of children and young adults.

The philosopher's help is of clear practical value in such a case because its recipient is emotionally ready to digest the more precise moral reflection. Its moral value will be far less if the recipient has no interest in being generous but is the sort of person who is intellectually titillated by subtle distinctions, or is interested in making a career in moral philosophy. In that case, the "practical" personal use to which he is likely to put the conceptual clarification about generosity is in philosophical discussions or perhaps in writing an article on generosity for a philosophy journal. Furthermore, most people have interests that fairly directly conflict with generosity—an acquisitive and stingy concern for property, or anxiety about career and having enough time to get their work done. If a person is dominated by such concerns, it seems unlikely that a mere clarification of moral concepts—no matter how elegant—will have much impact on his practical wisdom.

This is why serious moral philosophers—ones who want not merely to analyze moral concepts or develop ethical theories, but to contribute to the moral life of their communities—are often as concerned with the rhetorical force of their writing or speaking as they are with its conceptual precision. Writers like the Stoic Seneca, Samuel Johnson, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche are concerned not merely to clarify moral concepts as they understand them, but to use many devices of rhetoric, narrative, and psychological analysis to spark in their readers awareness of suppressed or unconscious concerns to which the moral concepts, as they understand them, can speak. Their implicit assumption, expressed in the terms of this essay, is that practical wisdom is inextricable from the emotions of the individual in which it resides.

Philosophical wisdom also becomes practical in setting some broad parameters for our understanding of the nature and development of the moral life. Here I am thinking of what philosophers call moral psychology, reflection on the nature of virtues and their interconnection with reason, thought, desire, emotion, habit, choice, and the like—indeed, the kind of thing I am doing here. We might think that such “theories” as the Aristotelian versus the Kantian, or the Cartesian versus the Platonic, are academic matters that drift harmless and boonless above the plane of moral practice. But this is probably not so. Something like wisdom or its opposite seems to be present, even at this “theoretical” level, ready to nourish or poison the lives of those who absorb it. Randy Maddox has shown how the influence of the moral psychology of Thomas Reid and Immanuel Kant, which underrate, and thus do not explore, the place of emotions in the life of virtue, undermined the process of sanctification in Methodist communities that were originally founded with the purpose of stressing and promoting sanctification. By taking up residence in our self-understanding and understanding of others, unrealistic moral psychologies can block the kinds of insight that, I have argued here, are of enormous and necessary practical significance in the advancement of our moral life. Heading off such abstract accounts is thus a contribution, if somewhat remote and uncertain, to practical wisdom. In addition to this negative function of philosophy, I hope that a moral psychology, done in sufficient richness of detail, may yield positive insights that find their way into the practical wisdom of individuals and moral communities.