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Individual Metaphysics

The Getting of Wisdom: Self-Conduct, Personal Identity, and Wisdom Across the Life Span

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Metaphysics is concerned with the nature and origins of existence. This makes it a reflexive human enterprise, invoking questions about the nature of mind, identity, and perception of reality through time and place. These are interesting and deep questions, but what, one may ask, have they got to do with organizations and management?

Two answers form the justification for this chapter and perhaps even for this volume. First, given that wisdom is a valued commodity in business as anywhere else, we need to be assured that we are not chasing shadows, that is, that the concept has some genuine meaning, reference, and substance. Second, if we agree that it does, it behooves us to consider how wisdom is acquired and whether it can be enhanced by any means. My answer to both of these questions is affirmative, from which it is a simple deduction that organizations, their leaders, and their members need wisdom now as much as ever before in their history.

The framework that I invoke in this chapter is the neo-Darwinian view of human nature and social existence (Nicholson, 2000, 2005b). This construes wisdom as a quality conferring fitness advantages on those who possess it or who have the wisdom to be able to draw on the wisdom of others. After defining the concept, I explore its contents, principally in terms of self-identity concepts, before moving on to consider what this implies for how wisdom can be acquired or enhanced. Wisdom is a project that is never completed, so the last part of this chapter puts it in a biographical life span

perspective, considering the implications of this analysis for how individuals, such as business leaders, may aspire to live and lead wisely.

The Problem of Wisdom

A perusal of the writings about wisdom reveals common themes to include the use of tacit knowledge and humility about one's fallibility (Sternberg & Lubart, 2001). At the risk of invalidating everything that follows in this chapter, one might say that this should convince us that it is not wise to define wisdom. Because I am not the first or the last to attempt this, I risk the folly of rushing in where angels fear to tread, appealing for support in this endeavor from Socrates, who said, "The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms." Searching for definitions in philosophy down the ages yields one overarching canopy of agreement: Wisdom is something good to have (Birren & Svensson, 2005). Wise actions are desirable and commendable. Wise people have a gift greater than mere knowledge, skill, or happiness. They are people to be attended to and followed.

But what does it mean to be a wise individual and to lead a wise life? Are these two questions with a single answer, or can they diverge? It is apparent that wisdom is an attribution applied both to individuals and to actions. It is logically conceivable that wise people can engage in foolish acts and that wise actions can be enacted by foolish people. This raises some obvious challenges. How do we spot wise people? Should we always imitate or seek to follow them? When can we trust ourselves to be wise? How do we go about getting wisdom?

These are trickier questions in modern Western economies than they have been in other times and places. For example, casting back to early philosophy, the Aristotelian take on wisdom is fundamentally ethical (Osbeck & Robinson, 2005). This view at its simplest is expressed in the words of Cicero: "The function of wisdom is to discriminate between good and evil." The wise person understands the nature of goodness and acts in ways that are good, and this helps to attune the person and his or her milieu to the propagation and maintenance of an ethical social order. This contrasts with the modern view, as expressed by Thoreau: "A man is wise with the wisdom of his time only." The Aristotelian ethical stance on wisdom is tenable only if there is a unitary consensus about the ethical architecture of the prevailing social order. In contemporary pluralistic society, this is hardly the case, confronted as we are by a startling array of belief systems and ideologies—all competing for our attention. Meanwhile, the climate of modern Western belief is increasingly relativistic, such that one might be minded to judge as self-falsifying any claim that a person of a particular faith or belief was the possessor of an ethically normative wisdom. Yet people do still follow sages, and those who are willing to accept their claims are likely to be perceived by those who do not accept them to be captives of a belief system bounded by

time and culture, that is, a sect. Awkwardly, sages tend to be disinclined to relativism and want their wisdom to be generalized across all societies. Therefore, any definition of wisdom likely to pass muster in our times, and for sure in a volume such as this where the unspoken ideology is the stance of nonideological social science, will need to follow Thoreau before Cicero.

Defining Wisdom

Stripped of ethics and unanchored in any unitary view of social values, what can wisdom connote for us today? The neo-Darwinian view, which I outline shortly, denies any metaphysic other than realist empiricism and requires wisdom to have some fitness-enhancing value that can be verified, that is, to have practical value. Wisdom, I therefore assert, consists in the ability to make good judgments. And what are good judgments? They are those that are proven to be correct or are demonstrated to lead to beneficial outcomes in the long term as well as the short term. Philosophical writings on wisdom are at pains to note that this comes not from the mere possession of expert knowledge but rather from the way in which knowledge and understanding are deployed (Sternberg, 1990). This implies, inter alia, knowing when not to act, being a person of judiciously few selected words, and having a developed awareness of the importance of doubt in making judgments plus a corollary awareness of one's own limitations. This makes wisdom a mix of insight, humility, and open-mindedness plus shot selection (to borrow a sports metaphor). An additional stream in the literature is the idea that wisdom is gained by having lived through and learned from experience. However, mere immersion is not sufficient; particular kinds of intelligence need to work on the raw material (Baltes & Smith, 1990). As Aldous Huxley, the novelist and essayist, put it, "Experience is not what happens to a man, it is what he does with what happens to him."

The implication of this analysis is that having lived longer increases one's chances of having obtained wisdom, (but without guaranteeing it) as the age-venerating Confucian tradition maintains, for a mark of wisdom is having done more with less. People can be wise beyond their years. Yet we should not confuse this with the so-called wisdom of the child or idiot savant, an error richly and comically immortalized in the novel and movie *Being There*. The hero, an intellectually challenged and amiable gardener, is mistaken for a political adviser and becomes credited with surpassing political wisdom on the strength of his gnomic, ambiguous, but ultimately vacuous utterances.

In short, wisdom—the ability to make good and farsighted judgments— can be acquired, requires time and experience, and yet is at best only weakly correlated with age (Jordan, 2005).

An operational definition of wisdom, therefore, could be that it is the quality of judgment that someone possesses that leads more experienced

and knowledgeable people to seek advice from that person. Managers recognize this quality; it is what leads some individuals to be spotted as leadership material quite early in their careers. It is a sought-after magic that organizations covet yet do not know how to cultivate, for wisdom cannot be readily appropriated. As Michel de Montaigne, the French Renaissance thinker, put it, "We can be knowledgeable with other men's knowledge, but cannot be wise with other men's wisdom."

My aim in this chapter is to help the reader to understand the processes by which individuals acquire, maintain, and use wisdom so defined and how this relates to the leadership and management of organizations.

A Darwinian Perspective

The Darwinian perspective, briefly, holds that we are a species of ape, with a mental apparatus that contains biases and capabilities that evolved, along with our physical morphology, to support our way of life as clan-dwelling hunter–gatherers. The world may have changed in the short span of human civilization over the past 10,000 years since the advent of agriculture and fixed settlements, but our mental design and capabilities have not changed (Barrett, Dunbar, & Lycett, 2002; Buss, 1999). We retain the psychological architecture of our origins (Nicholson, 1998; Pinker, 1997).

A first port of call in the search for the meaning of wisdom in this context, therefore, is to look at undeveloped societies. Wisdom here can be reduced to "the one to be followed." My own experiences in looking at the Maasai in Kenya (Nicholson, 2005a) show that (a) wisdom consists in superior capacity to give service to the community; (b) it is vested more in the elders than in the juniors, although in each age set[1] wise individuals are acknowledged implicitly rather than explicitly; and (c) it is depersonalized in that wisdom is the property either of a group (of elders) who make judgments or of individuals who are able to embody the spirit and intent of the community without any apparent "ego" or personal glorification. Thus, wisdom here has the status of (covert) reputation. This would seem close to the Aristotelian ideal; we follow the wise because the wise follow the spirit of our community. It is a selfless ideal that has value because it does not seek to be valued—something close to a Buddhist concept of wisdom. It is a theme in the literature on tribal leadership—the concept of the "big man" who demonstrates his greatness by skill in acquiring what the tribe most needs and shows his fitness to lead by sharing it selflessly with his people (Harris, 1978). In Darwinian terms, the costliness of this beneficence is a guarantee against false signaling of the giver's worth and, therefore, is a genuine mark of superiority or fitness (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1996). In contemporary times, the concept of "servant leadership" treads the same path (Greenleaf, 1991).

But in modern times, the model we follow is a simpler association of wisdom with fitness. We desire and require wise people we can follow—to help guide us with their superior judgment through the thicket of an ever more complex and ambiguous world. Unique perhaps to contemporary life is also the phenomenon of the person who is imputed with wisdom but is not followed. We live in a world where it is not so easy to follow as it is to desire to emulate, for example, when we find ourselves looking with envy at neighbors making good but inimitable judgments in their personal lives. Thus, wisdom becomes, in neo-Darwinian terms, a mark of people who have learned how to live by decisions and codes that raise their well-being and, ultimately, their "fitness" (Miller, 2000).

The Darwinian perspective points out that in the human community, reputation is one of the most precious commodities and is directly related to the reproductive fitness of the collective and thereby of the individual members of the collective (Wilson, 2002). In contemporary society, we inhabit multiple hierarchies in which people make social comparisons, and the reputation for wisdom, as we have defined it, is one of the highest qualities a person can possess. Although imperfectly related to age, farsighted good judgment is widely perceived to increase with experience. Hence, in tribal societies, the elders are venerated not just for their past contributions to the commonwealth but also for their knowing what to do because they have seen it all before. In corporate life and well-established organizations, it remains largely true that leaders are the equivalent of elders. Notwithstanding the attention that management and popular media tend to pay to the young stars of new organizations, the leadership ranks of most organizations remain firmly gerontocratic in character. One need only look at the age profile of most company boards—whether public or private companies—to see that many have a preponderance of directors in their 50s and, especially in large companies, in their 60s (Segal Company, 2001).

Let us now analyze more precisely the content, status, and ontogenesis of wisdom in human identity.

Wisdom and Self-Identity

Wisdom, in its most basic manifestation—the search for good and farsighted judgments—requires foresight, a uniquely human gift deriving from the capacity for self-consciousness. Thus, we need to analyze the getting of wisdom via the contents and processes of the self.

Following our earlier definition—wisdom as the capacity for farsighted good judgments—we can consider the *contents* of wisdom to be a library of heuristics that may be deployed to solve life's problems and meet its challenges (Gigerenzer, Todd, & ABC Research Group, 1999; Schloss, 2000). This implies that it is possible for people to be wise in specific domains.

For example, people could be astute in their political judgment but foolish in their personal lives.

We can focus our discussion on three broad domains: the world of human affairs, interpersonal relationships, and self-conduct. These have a scalar aspect; folly in relationships impairs capacity for wisdom in human affairs, and failure in self-conduct can undermine the capacity for wisdom in all other domains. This helps to solve the problem of defining a wise person. The more a person's judgment is recognized to generalize across these domains, the more likely the person is to be called wise.

Let us look at the meaning of wisdom across these three domains, focusing most of our discussion on self-conduct.

Wisdom in the first domain, the world of human affairs, is relatively straightforward to analyze. It amounts to an empirically testable capacity to guide and lead the opinions of others. This encompasses all areas of expert knowledge and, in some cases, broader domains of human interest and activity. The heuristics that constitute wisdom in such areas have the character of tacit knowledge (Sternberg, 1990)—hard to communicate and appropriate. It comes from having lived, experienced, and learned—and not just from having had the luxury of time to formulate opinions. As comedian George Burns put it, "Too bad that all the people who really know how to run the country are busy driving taxicabs and cutting hair."

Wisdom in relationships is more complicated. The Darwinian psychologist Nicholas Humphrey theorized that the evolutionary purpose of self-consciousness is to read other minds; it is the essential precondition to the art of empathy, that is, to understand and predict the motives of others (Humphrey, 1980). The Darwinian approach to interpersonal relationships revolves mainly around the mechanisms for achieving and sustaining cooperation, with the essential corollary skills of cheater detection and strategies for dealing with free riders (Boyd, Gintis, Bowles, & Richerson, 2003; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). One could equate these qualities with elements of emotional intelligence. The abilities to correctly discern emotions and to deal effectively with the emotions of others are clearly implicated in the search for the source of wisdom in relationships (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005). There is also an analytical element. We all use cues, tacit knowledge, and heuristics when interacting to "read minds" (Whiten, 1991), and some are able to do this more deeply and profoundly than are others (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Miller, 1990). Again, this wisdom is empirically testable via predictions of future actions and assessing the efficacy of interventions. It is the wisdom that psychotherapy and other interventions deploy to help individuals redirect their psychic energies.

The construct of emotional intelligence attempts to tie together elements of wisdom in the self and in relating to others. Even if one does not accept the unity of the construct (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2004), it does embody a key point, namely that interpersonal wisdom is hard, if not

impossible, to achieve without some mastery of the third domain—self-conduct. People who are at the mercy of impulses, thoughts, and feelings that they do not comprehend will have impaired judgment in relationships, especially where they themselves are directly involved.

Looking more closely at the elements of wisdom in the self and its conduct, first, we may note that the self is both fragile and robust. Its fragility comes from its ability to shift parameters and values, with potentially enormous impacts on the person, for example, the shift to suddenly seeing oneself as unattractive, guilty, or blessed. Numerous psychological experiments have demonstrated how readily people's self-perceptions may be manipulated (Robins & John, 1997). The robustness of the self lies in its persistence. Yogis and mystics must submit to rigorous disciplines to rid themselves of self-consciousness. The capacity for self-deception is also a tribute to the resilience of the self as a vital organ (Trivers, 2000), and again in the psychological laboratory there have been striking demonstrations of how people can easily be led into perceiving their selves to be the origins of actions that were externally caused (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

Mark Leary has provided an extended analysis of the dysfunctional consequences that come with self-consciousness (Leary, 2004). He argues that its surpassing value as an instrument for insight, planning, and control comes at some burdensome costs, which escalate the further we depart from the ancestral environment in which the organ of the self evolved. Faced by a burgeoning array of choices, seemingly infinite possibilities for social comparison, and opportunities for different imagined futures, we are beset by anxieties, regrets, jealousies, shame, and myriad disturbances to our peace of mind. The consequences are serious and sometimes fatal as people seek respite or escape from the agonizing extremes of inner preoccupation and its perturbations.

Leary (2004) points out that a universal theme of world religions, and perhaps a root theme for their metaphysics, is a shared recognition that the self is a problem, for all faiths offer solutions that promise either purification or release from the tyranny of the self. The concept of wisdom offered by people of spiritual faith is of this character—advocacy of self-denial or of strategies that will enable one to rise above the clamor of the self and attain states of peace and equanimity. But these do not fit the definition of wisdom I am seeking to discuss here, namely the active ability to grapple with the challenges of this world rather than to seek only to rise above them.

The Wise Self

Leary's (2004) analysis is much concerned with what he calls "self-talk"—our ability to conduct internal dialogues with ourselves over choices, self-perceptions, and judgments. This ability would seem to be a

prime candidate for explaining the functionality of wisdom in the domain of self-conduct. It is a necessary process to achieve the following:

- *Self-appraisal.* Wise conduct is likely to emanate from people who are able to use self-talk to maintain positive self-imagery by incorporating a realistic appraisal of their deficiencies, limitations, and conflicts (Erez & Earley, 1993). Related to this is the ability to make appropriate attribution and correctly focus their locus of control (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Faulty attributions are hazardous. At one end of the spectrum is the dysfunction of blithe indifference to evidence of the failure and its causes, an element that makes the recurrence of error more likely (Kernis, Zuckerman, Cohen, & Spadafora, 1982). At the other extreme is the false attribution of taking undue responsibility for events that are beyond one's psychological control, a malady that engenders disabling states of guilt or shame (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992; Turner, 1995). Thus, wisdom here equates with equilibrating self-esteem through well-judged attribution combined with ego strength. It also facilitates self-prediction (Shrauger & Osberg, 1983).

- *Self-regulation.* The self has been analyzed as being capable of switching its focus between promotion and prevention in goal-related decision making (Higgins, 2002), that is, by moving toward or avoiding stimuli so as to orient effectively. In a like manner, theorists have discussed self-regulation as an instrument for controlling mood through the duration of streams of action (John & Gross, 2004; Karoly, 1993). These functions are semiautomatic—occurring mostly below the level of conscious choice—but occasionally they are knowingly engaged. This reflexivity, to be effective, requires insight and willpower. This may be considered wisdom in self-regulation—the capacity to override automaticity with conscious control so as to respond to stimuli proportionately.

- *Perceptual control.* The interplay between goal states and perceptions lies at the heart of judgment and action, and it is especially relevant to risk assessment, probabilistic calculus, and planning. The vast literature on psychological biases documents the hazards that ensnare us all (Piattelli-Palmarini, 1994). Errors occur during all stages of decision making—in what we pay attention to, how we process information, our choices and preferences, and the ex post assessments we make after we have chosen and observed the consequences (Staw, 1980). Much of the time, perceptions are pressed into service to manage the unseen force of goal states (Powers, 1973). Thus, the more we want something, the more likely we are to misperceive dangers by underestimating the risks we run in getting it (Yates, 1992). Effective self-talk should help us to be more vigilant about the games we play to get what we want.

Thus, wisdom is constituted in self-talk—the reflexive capacity to be aware of one's self as a system and to engage the cognitions that will regulate mood,

perception, goal modification, and self-evaluation. It will often involve the capacity to reframe perceptions and experiences.

One can elaborate the beneficial consequences of self-talk being done effectively:

- *Quieting*. Equanimity in judgment can come from muting unnecessary internal chatter. This noise clogs the processing of information within a stream of goal-directed action (Baumeister, 1984). Strategies can be developed, for example, those deployed by artists and presenters to calm performance nerves.
- *Decentering*. I have adapted this Piagetian concept to apply to interpersonal relationships in management (Nicholson, 2002) so as to connote the art of imagining how the phenomenal world of others is different from one's own, especially people we find "difficult." It is not easy to counter the instinctive tendency to judge interactions from the perspective of ourselves as the victims or beneficiaries of others' actions, but doing so can yield major benefits, especially in problem solving.
- *Cognitive self-analysis*. This denotes the ability to engage in a critique of the biases affecting one's perceptions, evaluations of events, and estimation of their causes and consequences (Robins & John, 1997). Our recent research on traders in finance highlights the value of this gift (Fenton-O'Creevy, Nicholson, Soane, & Willman, 2005).
- *Detachment*. Achieving cognitive separation from potentially disabling emotions is a key skill in managing many critical events such as strategies for mastering irrational fears, painful longings, jealousy, and excessive guilt and shame (Snyder, 1974).
- *Questioning*. Insight comes from a willingness to challenge and question one's implicit taxonomies. This applies not least to the concepts by which we analyze our own states and those of others, for example, avoiding insidious stereotypes, negative assessments of groups, and attachment to empty concepts.
- *Control*. Effective living requires enabling actions to be effectively selected and executed, avoiding excessive risk taking and self-destructive strategies in the quest for self-management such as substance abuse (Baumann & Kuhl, 2005; Hull, 1981).
- *Skepticism*. It is desirable to question belief systems and ideologies to an appropriate degree. Note that this does not mean the absence of belief systems; rather, it means a heightened sense of the contingencies and relativities to which we are subject, thereby avoiding intolerance, fanaticism, and susceptibility to unproductive conflict.
- *Integrity*. Maintaining the integrity of the self means avoiding surrender to the will of others and also avoiding self-depletion (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998)—the draining of psychic energy through excessive attempts to regulate the self. In effect, this is the self-talk that regulates all of the other self-talk—what one might call balance and realism in self-conduct.

This analysis illustrates the earlier observation that wisdom in the conduct of the self is a platform for all other kinds of wisdom—optimizing the intrusion of one's personal thoughts and feelings into one's judgments of other people, relationships, and human affairs more generally. Therefore, there is a critical question that remains: How does one cultivate the art of effective self-talk and the wisdom that it may yield?

The Getting of Wisdom

What kind of actions can one engage in to acquire wisdom? Let us first consider key underlying processes.

Trial and Error

I have already noted that a platform of experience is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the acquisition of wisdom. Wisdom is as domain specific as are the arenas of a person's experience. Experience needs to be sufficiently varied within a domain for the heuristics to be reliable. It also needs to be active for initiated acts to yield positive consequences. Philosophers are apt to point to the pain of acquiring wisdom resulting from taking risks and making mistakes. Learning from errors is easier said than done (Cannon, 1999; Frese, 1995). It requires a degree of analytical detachment that is hard to achieve, especially when the error is large enough to be branded a "failure." The instinctive response is to minimize the pain and seek to avoid its recurrence. This may include recourse to "magical" and superstitious beliefs about how to escape future failures. Thus, wisdom is constituted partly by an accepting approach to the inevitability of failures and a determination for them not to inhibit the process of seeking and learning.

Observing and Imitating

The tough question here is what or whom to observe and imitate as well as what or whom not to imitate. The Darwinian view of fitness makes this an imperative skill for successful adaptation. The prerequisite for this is twofold: wide experience of a diverse range of people and opinions and some effective mental models for understanding and predicting the behavior of others. This amounts to an injunction to cultivate the awareness of a good "naive" psychologist.

Instruction

It may be true that wisdom cannot be taught, but it can be learned. Self-improvement literature has been a publishing phenomenon since Victorian times, when it offered recipes for living to an increasingly needy readership beset by the challenges of modern life. Today, evangelists, shamans, management

gurus, and counselors of every hue are on hand to satisfy the even greater needs of our times. Wisdom may emanate from judicious selection from these and other sources, such as works on psychology, philosophy, and religion, but only if guided by a coherent purpose and a commitment to test ideas before they are assimilated.

Smart Questioning

Agency is central to the getting of wisdom, and the ability to interrogate the world is a key skill in achieving it. Some of the wisest writers on psychology and organization have demonstrated its effectiveness. Karl Weick, writing on sensemaking, portrayed it as a fundamentally active process (Weick, 1995), whereas Chris Argyris used a dialoging methodology to discern the gap between "espoused theory" and "theory-in-use," offering a means to helping organizations get out of defensive routines (Argyris, 1993). This is linked with "double-loop learning"—the ability to understand the overarching and systemic errors in systems, including those that exist to detect errors.

Analyzing and Theorizing

A key element in the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) is the ability to abstract principles from sense data and reflection. This suggests that some kinds of intelligence are probably threshold conditions for wisdom, that is, the ability to construct and understand representations and chains of reasoning.

Intuiting and Testing

In his best-seller *Blink,* Malcolm Gladwell, drawing on a mix of anecdotes and academic research, celebrates the power and mystery of "thin slicing" intuition (Gladwell, 2005). However magical this facility might appear to be, it clearly requires the possession of a matrix of relevant knowledge and understanding from which insights may be generated; otherwise, intuitions are no better than guesswork. The mental process by which one cultivates insight is more difficult to formulate, but it would seem to involve many of the elements of self-control that we have already reviewed, such as the ability to detach, reframe, and challenge assumptions. Finally, having a frame of mind that insists on testing intuitions and analyzing the causes of their success or failure is also important—as wise traders do in financial markets (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2005).

The Biography of Wisdom

Let us now move up to the level of the person. What is the wisdom of living? We have noted that the person attributed to be wise is not without

blemish or error—quite the contrary. Rather, what distinguishes the wise person is the ability to assimilate the good and the bad of day-to-day living and extract superior meaning, that is, more penetrating, prudent, and promising heuristics than others might commonly desire. The forgoing analysis of self-identity suggests that wisdom blends heuristics of three main kinds: reflexive, conceptual, and action oriented.

The reflexive heuristics are those that apply by introspection to aspects of self-functioning and relationships in which one is involved. The conceptual are the heuristics for challenging, updating, and exploring new ideas and ways of thinking. The action-oriented heuristics are those that govern risk taking, exploration, spontaneity, and choice in behavior (both verbal and nonverbal).

The question that will occupy us for the remainder of this chapter is why and how people seem to have unequal access to these heuristics. Are people born with the seeds of wisdom? Does it require any particular schedule of experience during early or later life? What does living wisely connote in terms of how people configure their lives? The dangers of this agenda are self-evident—the arrogance of imposing normative prescriptions on the lives of others. I attempt to avoid this, but some normative judgments are inevitable because an empirical science approach will inevitably lead to conclusions about what are the predictors of superior judgment. Let us approach this chronologically with a model of biography.

Figure 17.1 presents a framework for analyzing lives that I use in a biography course I teach at London Business School for a predominantly career-shifting, middle-aged class of professional and executive students on the Sloan Fellowship Masters Program. It is designed to enhance self-determination and, in effect, to help students accelerate the getting of wisdom.
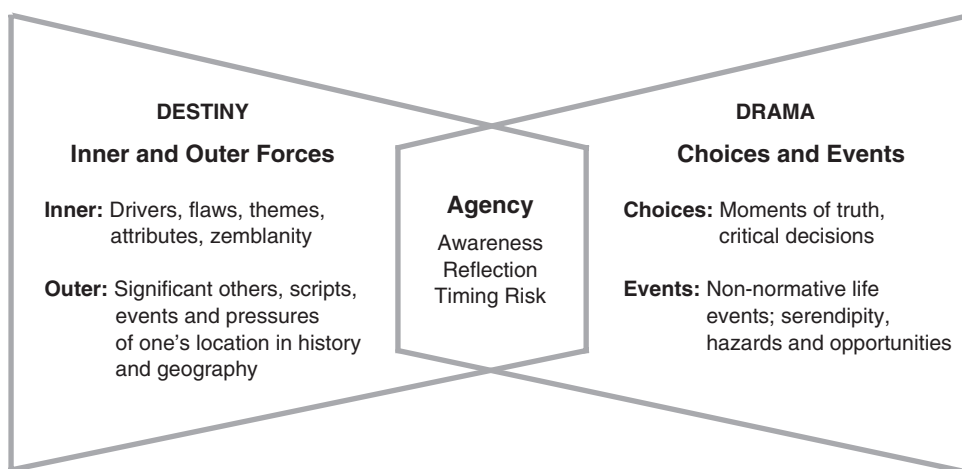

Figure 17.1   Destiny, Drama, and Deliberation: The Crossroads of Biography

The course involves a mix of autobiographical analysis and time spent look-
ing at the lives of leaders and others to help make sense of the forces that
shape lives, so that students may achieve greater control over their life
course through insight.

Figure 17.1 summarizes the constituents of biographical analysis as a cross-
roads between destiny and drama. Destiny is a deeply unfashionable concept
in an age in which we elevate freedom of choice to the pinnacle of idealized
existence, yet none of us is unconstrained in how he or she lives. I define des-
tiny as the "gravitational" forces, both internal and external to us, that pull us
toward a limited set of destinations via our preferences and opportunities.

The inner forces of destiny include genetic dispositions, abilities, physical
characteristics, vulnerabilities, and susceptibilities—the hand we are dealt to
live with (Bouchard, 1997; Plomin, 1994). Figure 17.1 also includes the word
"zemblanity." This neologism was coined by the writer William Boyd in his
novel *Armadillo.* Boyd (1998) defined it as follows: "Zemblanity, the oppo-
site of serendipity, the faculty of making unhappy, unlucky, and expected dis-
coveries by design. Serendipity and zemblanity: the twin poles of the axis
around which we revolve" (pp. 234–235). The concept of zemblanity counters
the idea that we make our own good luck with the equal and opposite notion
that we make our own misfortune just by being who we are. Zemblanity con-
sists of the traps that we dig for ourselves and, predictably, stumble into.

The outer forces of destiny are the limitations, resources, and opportuni-
ties available to us in the milieu of our origins. There is plentiful evidence that
careers are as much inherited as they are freely chosen—or, more precisely,
that life chances are quite unevenly distributed for each newborn (Ellis,
1993). They are predictable from the status and resources of the family milieu
as well as from involuntary factors such as inherited wealth, education, loca-
tion, ethnicity, and local historical events (Han & Mulligan, 2001; Nicholson
& De Waal-Andrews, 2005). Destiny also resides in the "scripts" we carry
with us throughout life about who we are, where we are going, and why we
are going there (McAdams & Ochberg, 1988; Steiner, 1974). These are con-
structed during childhood, tested and refined during adolescence, and enacted
during adulthood. They are partly self-wrought, that is, definitions of the self
that sit comfortably with our self-identity. Others are handed down by
parents, siblings, teachers, and others who have an idea of who we are and,
more dangerously, what we will or should become (Ibarra, 2003).

It is possible to submit to the forces of destiny—following one's impulses
and acting out the script that one finds oneself holding. But even in the
most docile life, these can come into conflict; the spirit rebels against what
is bequeathed. This is the story of many a failed family business succession,
where the next generation is unwilling or unable to take the baton that the
senior generation wishes to pass along (Lansberg, 1999).

Such intrusions into the otherwise predictable life course are what I call
the drama of biography. Many of them are externally originating events—
what are called "non-normative life events" in life span development theory

(Baltes, Reese, & Lipsett, 1980). These are wide-ranging, from choosing a marriage partner to losing a job through retrenchment. Some are happy accidents. Serendipity, the converse of zemblanity, is the good stuff that comes to us unbidden—the good luck that can change the course of one's life without having been wished or willed. Yet Louis Pasteur (wisely) said, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

It is the drama of the life course that is the chief focus of published biographies. The dramatic elements to which we pay most attention are those originating in the person, that is, acts of choice that are internally driven diversions from the path of destiny. Some are moments of truth. These often arise through some external trigger stimulating us to interrogate and sometimes overturn previously unchallenged processes and involvements. These are the Damascene moments in many careers where new paths are chosen after some external shocks (Young & Rodgers, 1997).

In my biography class, quite often I hear the view that our destiny changes with every momentary decision. This idea is captured in the parable "for the sake of a horseshoe nail the kingdom was lost" and the idea in chaos theory that a butterfly wing beat can trigger a causal chain that escalates to culminate in a mountain avalanche. There is an alternative view that the self-correcting compass of destiny—our dispositions, scripts, and restricted menu of opportunities—keeps tugging us back to the same quite circumscribed set of possible destinations. We have many possible selves we can live, but the set is delimited and finite (Yost, Strube, & Bailey, 1992). In systems theory, this is called "equipotentiality," where one can have numerous choice nodes in a network but the end point remains the same.

Many of the choices we make are more algorithmic than we care to think. We agonize about them as if they are life changing, but in actuality (a) each choice is quite predictable from the prevailing conditions and (b) it is not a genuine crossroads so much as a decision about which diversion to indulge before we are drawn back to our mainstream. Thus, wisdom in life choices is the ability to determine which junctures are really crossroads and which are energy-consuming diversions that ultimately come back into the main pathway of one's life course. This choice process is what I call "deliberation." This requires exercise of "agency," the concept that stands at the crossroads of biography in Figure 17.1.

Agentic deliberation means awareness of the forces shaping one's life—the ability to reflect on events to assess whether they should be allowed to trigger far-reaching change or whether they should be stabilized by force of will, the skill and strength to know which risks should be taken and which risks should be left alone, and the art of picking the best time for destiny to be challenged and perhaps changed. Figure 17.2 shows this schematically as metaphorical modalities.

Young people are inclined to think that unless one is sailing—making willed changes—one is not really living life to the fullest. But as exciting as sailing may be, it is also tiring, often lonely, and occasionally fruitless.

	Stable	Changeful
Chosen	A. Moored in harbor	B. Sailing
Not Chosen	C. Shipwrecked	D. Following the river

Figure 17.2   The Life Journey: Metaphorical Modalities

A simpler way to travel is to follow the river—enjoying the landscapes that life presents as one follows the stream of destiny and drama. We often have the luxury of neither sailing nor following the river and instead find ourselves moored in harbor. This can provide the rest and tranquility that we need before we set sail again. Shipwreck may be undesired, but it can be a powerful source of insight and altered perspectives and should not be appraised as wholly negative. Many of the most important triggers for life-transforming choice and change emanate from this region—the area where we have been forced to relinquish control and accept change. Surrendering to chance and chaos is sometimes the wise thing to do—trusting in the integrity of the self to forge creative sensemaking out of what follows.

What does this tell us about the wisdom of living? Perhaps we are putting the old wine of philosophers and sages into new bottles, but that may be necessary for a concept that has become obscured in the complexities of modern living. One major cause of difficulty in conceiving of wisdom in living is that we have become obsessed by the youthful image of sailing through a life of adventurous choices, blinding ourselves to the unseen hand of shaping forces. Wisdom in living means recapturing concepts such as destiny and working with them. Destiny is shaped by will as well as by circumstance, and wisdom consists in knowing when to submit, when to fight, and when to steer. As William James put it, "The art of being wise is knowing what to overlook" (James, 1890).

Individual differences matter. This is easier for some than it is for others. It follows that wisdom is more accessible to those who have the qualities of mind and life to be able to engage in the processes we have analyzed. Early life experience may be critical. Karen Horney, along with other writers on disorders of development, showed how impairments to the development of

healthy self-functioning during early life make wisdom nearly inaccessible for those individuals who become locked into neurotic strategies to right wrongs that cannot be undone and to fight demons who lie trapped within the interstices of their minds (Horney, 1950). These are not hopeless cases. Redemption can come from therapeutic intervention through which such lost souls find the wisdom of self-acceptance and the possibility of new growth.

Practical Implications for Leaders and Others

Recalling the three domains in which wisdom has been considered—human affairs, interpersonal relations, and self-conduct—and expanding the latter to a consideration of wise living, a number of implications can be derived. First, wisdom in human affairs requires attention to boundary conditions. The acquisition of tacit knowledge is noted as domain specific, and possession of mere expertise is not enough. Qualities of the individual and their differential ability to assimilate knowledge and distil wisdom are implicated. Wisdom is an unequally distributed form of social capital. The implication, therefore, is that we should seek to recognize the wise as not necessarily those who are designated as the keepers of wisdom or those who are charged with making the most far-reaching judgments. Wise people are located in every walk of life and at all levels of organizations. How do we find them? Ask others. They are known and recognized by their peers.

Second, wisdom in relationships cannot be acquired merely by studying psychology, as any psychologist will tell you. It does require elements of emotional intelligence. It also must be accepted that people have unequal access to these qualities. This is partly a matter of inborn and stable individual differences and partly a product of formative experiences. Yet any person can become more skilled in the practices of reading others, self-insight, and self-control. Formal disciplines can help in this area, as can self-help media and coaching. To this degree, wisdom can be enhanced by disciplines and practice.

Third, wisdom in self-conduct benefits from many of the same inputs, including disciplines and practices. These we have reviewed as residing in the domains of self-appraisal, self-regulation, and perceptual control. They involve feats of imagination, discipline, detachment, and intellectual and emotional courage. How can one assist such processes? Probably the best aids are what Carl Rogers called "psychological space" and "psychological freedom" (Rogers, 1954) plus insight into the processes by which self-knowledge is concealed or revealed by the self's machinations.

Finally, let us return to the whole person perspective that the biographical approach brings into focus. Figure 17.3 contains a tool for autobiographical self-analysis that I offer to my Sloan Fellowship students. In itself, it offers no more than an inventory—a process that, if conducted rigorously, offers the possibility of insight into where on one's life's journey one acquired the goals, styles, flaws, and capabilities that currently constitute one's traveling gear. The last question on the list is the invitation to wisdom—challenge to

- *Origins.* Why were you born? Do you know what was happening to your parents at that time? What life themes come from these origins?

- *Dispositions.* What long-lasting personality traits do you recognize in yourself? Which ones do you see as inborn temperament, and which ones did you acquire as a child?

- *Bonding.* What family relationships were especially formative? What parenting styles, sibling relationships, and other key influences affected you?

- *Role models.* What other critical relationships—peers, teachers, and so on—were important as role models (positive or negative) up to adolescence?

- *Context.* What was the context of your childhood? Was it rich, poor, or full of change? How did this shape your goals?

- *Scripts.* What were the key learning experiences that shaped your early identity? What scripts are you carrying from that time?

- *Choices.* During young adulthood, what choices did you make that turned out to be crucial for you? Which were not really "you"?

- *Reflection.* How might your answers above be biased by rationalization, hindsight, and the stories others tell of you?

Figure 17.3   Journey to Adult Identity: Autobiographical Analysis

question what one is taking for granted and what one might seek to claim greater control over. Socrates put the case in the strongest terms: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

For leaders, this injunction can be troublesome. How much do leaders really want wisdom? We must accept the harsh truth that some leaders might feel as if they are better off without it. By this, I mean that there are leaders who are in positions where they are constrained to act unethically, manage for the short term, obey immovable constraints, and compromise principles for the sake of immediate contingencies. Wisdom will be a source of pain for those on a path to destruction regardless of the other benefits it might bring. We need to acknowledge that many well-meaning leaders do not realize what they are taking on until they are incumbent and then come to apprehend that there is no easy or safe exit route. For these, we may wish that organizations become wiser in how they operate and in what they value, so that they can find and retain leaders who can afford to be wise.

Note

1. Maasai society is structured in age sets of up to 14 years, marking the transitions between male juvenile, warrior, and elder.

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