

**Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*. New York, Riverhead Books (Penguin), 2010. 324 pages. \$16 paper, \$26.95 cloth.**

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, with its characteristic precision and concise expression, treats the cardinal virtues by giving prominence to the habit of prudence. As the *Catechism* puts it, this excellence “disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (no. 1806). Prudence has many other names: foresight, sagacity, wisdom, practical reason, or just plain old “good common sense” about how to act and what to do. In medieval Latin, the term *prudentia* was formed from a contraction of the ancient term *providentia*, that is, divine foresight. The virtue tradition praises *prudentia* as *auriga virtutum*, the herding charioteer that gathers all the other virtues and guides each judgment of conscience. St. Thomas Aquinas explains this virtue by synthesizing the scriptural tradition with Roman writers and Aristotle; in Greek, Aristotle used the term *phronesis* to distinguish practical wisdom (knowing how to act) from productive wisdom (knowing how to make something) and contemplative wisdom (knowing eternal truths).

It goes almost without saying that the virtue of prudence is sorely lacking in our time. *Practical Wisdom*, the new book by Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, is worth reading primarily because of its many examples of the ways in which we need this virtue. The book masterfully brings into focus many instances in which contemporary social institutions encourage shortsighted decisions that are unwise, selfish, and foolish.

The contemporary professional mindset is constantly proposing more and more policies. Oversight mechanisms tell people what to do and monitor them to make sure they are doing it. However, instead of making things better, this proliferation often undermines the human capacity to make appropriate judgments about the situation at hand. *Practical Wisdom* focuses especially on institutions in the context of business, law, education, and medicine. The authors are at their best when they provide examples from American life of our contemporary lack of wisdom: bankers and financiers who place short-term profits before what is appropriate for individual borrowers and the common good of a stable economy; lawyers and judges constrained by mandatory sentencing requirements that take the judgment out of justice; teachers in public schools who find themselves incentivized to follow a script aimed at focusing on some students while neglecting others, in order to increase standardized test scores; and health care professionals whose

efforts focus less on healing and more on hassling with insurance companies, anticipating possible malpractice suits, and squeezing patients into seven-minute visits.

*Practical Wisdom* offers many examples of the destructive tendency toward bureaucratization. My favorite is the story of the archeology professor from the University of Michigan who took his five-year-old son to a baseball game to watch the Detroit Tigers. At the stadium, the boy asked for lemonade, so the father went to the concession stand. All they had was Mike's Hard Lemonade. Not knowing it was an alcoholic beverage, he served it to his son. A security guard saw the child take a sip and, following policy, reported it to a law enforcement official who called an ambulance. The child was rushed to the hospital. The doctors found no trace of alcohol, but policy then required that the boy be removed from his family, placed in Child Protective Services, and then assigned to a foster home. A judge later ruled that the child could go home to his mom, but only if his dad left the house and checked into a hotel for two weeks. Each step of the way, decisions were made according to policy and procedure—without attending to the obvious difference between a caring father who made a silly mistake and other instances in which a parent turns a blind eye to alcohol abuse or cases in which a parent regularly supplies alcohol for an underage child.

This book grows out of a course taught at Swarthmore by Schwartz (Psychology) and Sharpe (Political Science). It's obvious that the professors have spent a good amount of time reflecting on our need for practical wisdom. Their goal, in their teaching and in the book, is to retrieve Aristotle's emphasis on *phronesis* in order to make this virtue relevant to our contemporary context, especially in professional settings. The real strength of their book is in their wonderful examples of the ways in which contemporary professional institutions proliferate policies that undermine practical wisdom. The text is quite readable. One can easily find online several videos of Barry Schwartz delivering lectures on our loss of wisdom; these fruitfully capture the heart of the book's argument. I plan to assign the book to my students as a supplemental text in order to encourage consideration of how we need to cultivate this important virtue.

*Practical Wisdom* gets us asking the right questions: In what ways do contemporary social institutions tend to undermine practical wisdom? How can we support practitioners (in medicine, law, business, and education) in pursuit of integral excellences rather than focusing on carrots and sticks? How can we form social institutions that encourage practitioners to embody practical wisdom in their deliberations, judgments, and decisions?

The book's diagnosis of contemporary social institutions is insightful, and the direction of the proposed cure is spot on: We need to retrieve the cardinal virtue of practical wisdom. At the same time, the book has its limitations. For starters, quite a bit more could be said regarding the proposed cure. The book ends with a hopeful call to reform our institutions in a way that encourages wise practitioners, but many readers will find the proposal long on hope and short on specifics. Additionally, the book has several deep but not insurmountable philosophical shortcomings. The notion of a tradition of practical wisdom is entirely missing; the story jumps from Aristotle in ancient Greece to the contemporary American context without noting the 2,400-year history and tradition of prudence. The authors write in a sort of American secular liberal voice. They draw a few anecdotes from their Jewish tradition, but they evince no knowledge of the Catholic intellectual tradition or the centrality of prudence in the tradition of the virtues. Further, they overplay their criticism of rules. They make it seem that Aristotelian practical wisdom is anti-rule and self-sufficient, and that rules and principles are superfluous. In this way, they misrepresent Aristotle, who states explicitly that some actions are intrinsically disordered and hence always and everywhere wrong, for example, murder, theft, and adultery (*NE* 1107a11). The book also neglects the role of practical wisdom with regard to conscience and the natural law. Finally, they say too little too late about the need for moral virtue, they rush over the profound connection between moral virtue and practical wisdom, and they ignore the way in which practical wisdom is both relativized and deepened by an awareness of the importance of contemplating eternal truths.

Despite these shortcomings, *Practical Wisdom* is commendable for its easy-reading style and for its many contemporary examples of our need for right reason with respect to our actions and institutions.

Gregory R. Beabout  
*Saint Louis University*