

Practical Wisdom

Eleanor Stewart, PhD
John Dosssetor Health Ethics Centre
Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry
9 December 2011

Aristotle

Phronesis: wisdom to know what to do in particular circumstances

Eudaimonia: long-lasting happiness that is the goal of life; human flourishing

Aristotle's forms of virtues

- Character virtues
 - Courage
 - Temperance
 - Justice
 - Self-respect
- Intellectual virtues
 - Science
 - Art
 - Philosophy

The Golden Mean

- Virtues represent the mean between excess and deficiency
- Use rational judgment based on consideration of all the facts in a particular situation

What does practical wisdom consist of?

- Knowing what to do (do the right thing)
- Knowing why you do it (right reason)
- Knowing when to do (at the right time)
- Knowing to whom (to the right person)

How does practical wisdom develop?

- Aristotle > practice, experience, = habit
- Cognitive science > perception, emotion

A short story...

Why are you so angry?

Why is practical wisdom important? (challenges)

- As a counterbalance to:
 - Overreliance on evidence (especially when there is none)
 - Overreliance on experts (not thinking)
 - Overreliance on rules and procedures

Another story (or two)...

3 times, You're Out!
It's not what you think

Can practical wisdom be taught?

Sellman (2009) offers a re-direct
– Can phronesis be learned?

What can we do?

- Community
- Stories
- Opportunities * (one last story)

And in the end...

Be like Mr. Dress-up

Selected references

- Aristotle . *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin (1985). Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Oberle, K. and Bouchal, S. (2009). *Ethics in Canadian Nursing Practice: navigating the journey*. Toronto: Pearson.
- Schwartz, B. and Sharpe, K. (2010). *Practical wisdom: the right way to do the right thing*. NY: Riverhead Books.
- Sellman, D. (2009). Practical wisdom in health and social care: teaching for professional phronesis. *Learning in Health and Social Care*, 8 (2), 84-91.

Contact information:

Eleanor Stewart
John Dossetor Health Ethics Centre
5-16 University Terrace
University of Alberta

ges@ualberta.ca