

AFTERWORD

by David Mathews

The reason for having a series of *Exchanges* with the same themes is to allow readers to follow the development of ideas from one issue to another. One of these themes has been what scholars might contribute to the production of practical wisdom or *phronesis* — what a democratic public creates in order to guide its actions. That was the subject of several articles in the last issue, and it is a central theme in this issue.

No instant insight, practical wisdom develops over time and in stages. It begins in determining what is happening to our community or country. The next stage is deciding what those events mean to us collectively — or making sense of them. How do the things that are happening to us affect what is most important to us? Finally, we must make judgments about what we should or shouldn't do in response.

The question the *Exchange* explores is what role scholars might play at each of these stages. In the last issue, Peter Levine points out that practical wisdom is normative; it is about what ought to be. There is such a thing as moral truth but all of the evidence about *what is* doesn't give scholars any more authority to make judgments about *what ought to be* than anyone else. Even so, Levine warns, the empirical knowledge sometimes takes on a normative cast. In economics, for example, what is efficient might be falsely equated with what is good. At most, he says, scholars can use their knowledge of history or evidence from the natural sciences to answer citizens' questions about whether an approach has been tried before or whether it will work.¹

This issue continues the discussion of what scholars might contribute to practical wisdom by looking at the first two stages. Several articles deal with what David Brown calls “public thinking,” which is the engine for creating practical wisdom. Starting with the recognition that practical wisdom ends in judgments about what should happen, Bent Flyvbjerg shows how the first step toward making those judgments — knowing what has happened — can be accomplished in ways that are more consonant

with democratic self-rule. He worries that unequal relations of power distort what a democratic citizenry knows. So he proposes a *phronetic* methodology for research that begins with details and context, draws on multiple perspectives and interpretations of evidence, and emphasizes values rather than “disinterested” theories. His book suggests that scholars can contribute to the creation of practical wisdom by opening up their epistemological assumptions, their assumptions about what it means “to know.”

Flyvbjerg isn't the only scholar challenging conventional assumptions about how we can best know the world around us. In a paper in the *Chicago-Kent Law Review* on consultative reasoning, P. Christopher Smith insists that certain realities can only be heard. For example, compare what you know by seeing your mother's name *written* with what you know by *hearing* her say, “This is your mother calling.” Smith defines *phronesis* as “the knowing that guides deliberation . . . to good moral choices” and argues that such knowing isn't a product of what goes on inside our heads but rather comes from what we hear from others about their experiences.²

Phillip Sandro takes up the question of how we make sense of what happens to us, which is the next “stage” in creating practical wisdom. He approaches practical wisdom through his work in community organizing and civic education. If we hope to be effective in addressing social and political problems, he believes, we must be involved in a “continual making of meaning” out of the reality we experience. Having shared “contexts of meaning” is critical since we each experience things in our own way. Douglas Challenger and Joni Doherty agree, pointing out that the knowledge of what has happened will only get us so far in solving public problems. They go on to say that citizens must deal with what they call “the qualitative ingredients of human choice,” including the meanings and purposes we attach to things.

But how exactly do we arrive at shared meanings when we see events differently, using our own perceptual filters? And what can scholars contribute to “meaning-making,” which is the intermediate step between determining *what is* (empirical knowledge) and deciding *what ought to be* (practical wisdom or judgment). Sandro's answer is to immerse his students in theories of meaning, so that they might better “read” the world around them. Challenger and Doherty take a different tack; they encourage their students to look for connections between scientific data and

the values and concerns they encounter in their communities.

Peter Levine, in his book *Living Without Philosophy*, cautions against the assumption that there are guiding principles or techniques that we can use in moral reasoning. Somewhat like Flyvbjerg, he links meaning-making with the way we know what has happened to us, suggesting that scholars can contribute to making sense of our world by “describing particulars in a judgmental way.”³ These descriptions would allow citizens to comprehend a multitude of details and give them facts that are morally salient, that is, facts about intent and purpose.⁴ Scholars can describe “acts, characters, political alternatives, and even whole social situations in thick, value-laden ways.” But who gets to say which descriptive is best? Can that be determined by peer review among scholars? Not according to Levine, who argues that the judge of such a description is “anyone who may be affected by it.”⁵ This argument implies that however well scholars help us with knowing the world, we citizens are still left with the task of meaning-making.

If there aren't rules to guide us to true meanings, what do we do? We may have descriptions of the intent and purpose behind what is happening, but how do we go about determining if these are consistent with what is most important to us? Hannah Arendt, drawing on Kant, says that there is a kind of thinking — “moral reasoning” — that enables us to understand what it *means* for something to exist.⁶ It helps us decide what it means when teenage drinking increases, or when the World Trade Center is hit by two airplanes. I believe such questions in their complete form are asking, What do these things mean *in terms of what is valuable to us*? When facing some disturbing or frightening possibility, we navigate back and forth between seeing the event, thinking about how we might respond, and considering how various options for acting might affect what we hold dear. In the process, we redefine everything: what we think really happened, what we might do, and even whether what we once thought was important is still as valuable. When we do this individually, we only need to consult ourselves and friends we know well. But when we are engaged in moral reasoning on public issues, we have to take into consideration how strangers see the events, a range of options, and what is most important to us collectively. Consequently, as P. Christopher Smith points out, moral reasoning has to be external not internal. It isn't like the back-and-forth thinking that goes on just inside our head;

it begins and ends in public talk. Arendt argues that such public reasoning can't be replaced by listening to the insights of "wise men."⁷ We all need to be involved personally because we have to make collective decisions about combating shared problems like the abuse of alcohol and the acts of terrorists.

Does this imply that scholars have no place in moral reasoning? Does their education equip them to describe but give them no more authority in reasoning than in making judgments about what should be done? Or do they have distinctive means of determining what it means for something to exist? This brief article isn't the place to pursue such questions in depth, though it could be a rich ore for future issues of the *Exchange*. It might be particularly interesting to compare accounts of moral reasoning with the results of two studies now under way by John Doble and Richard Harwood on the nature of "public thinking," which is the way citizens "reason" when actually deliberating over how to deal with issues like alcohol and terrorism.

One of several objections to a rigorous examination of the scholar's role in moral reasoning might be that it is far too academic to be of use to any but a few political philosophers. From this perspective, the question of the role of the scholar is only one dimension of a larger issue, which isn't about academe but democracy. That discussion should start with what self-rule requires, not what faculty members do. The latter question can't be answered except in the context of the former one.

Cole Campbell, a pioneer in public journalism and a Kettering associate, has suggested that a new *Higher Education Exchange* series might pursue the specific question of what a democratic citizenry needs to know in order to govern itself. The follow-up question would be how various institutions, including colleges and universities and their faculties, might contribute either to such knowledge or to the process of creating such knowledge. Campbell's suggestion has set off a lively debate. One reaction has been that knowledge is too passive and implies that there is some body of information that people need in order to govern themselves.

Others prefer, as do several authors in this issue, using public scholarship as a broad theme, without any particular definition. The worry, as you might imagine, is that the phrase's different and changing interpretations make it too imprecise to be useful. Something that is anything to everybody runs the risk of being

nothing to everyone. Julie Ellison argues, however, that this ambiguity is as it should be; no one should have a monopoly on what public scholarship is. She believes that one of the virtues of the term is that it isn't rigidly defined, as most disciplines are. And David Cooper shows how rewarding it can be to redefine your career by your own journey into public life.

Finally, I have heard it said that neither reviving public epistemology nor concentrating on democratic theory will be as productive as simply asking scholars where they stand in public life. That is less precise than asking them how they contribute to practical reason but more precise than asking what they consider public scholarship. The idea behind the suggestion is to let the definition of the role of scholars emerge from where they choose to locate themselves in public life. Someone who elects to be a critic stands in one place, perhaps outside, observing. Someone else may elect to serve the public by making their knowledge available through lectures and performances. In earlier issues of the *Exchange*, Jay Rosen positioned himself differently by posing questions for his profession such as, if the job of journalists is to inform the public, and there is no public, what is their job? Other scholars are locating themselves close to the "winged words of conversation" used in public thinking. You may recognize that quotation from John Dewey, who believed that practical wisdom depends on face-to-face, give-and-take exchanges. Ideas about what to do, he wrote, "that are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is but broken and imperfect thought."⁸ That implies the role of the scholar is to facilitate this sort of communication, perhaps even to the point of doing his or her thinking out loud or in the public arena.

You can judge for yourself the merits of focusing on where academics stand because this *Exchange* offers two cases of where faculty groups have placed themselves in public life, not just to serve the citizenry but to help create public life itself. In addition to the report from Challenger and Doherty, Anne Wolford and associates report on providing space for public policy-making at Virginia Tech's Public Policy Institute. What intrigues me about their article is that reaching out to the public in a different way has come back into the classroom through a new course on public issues, a course that examines the public as well as policy issues. This project has apparently heightened "democratic sensibilities" of future urban planners.

As I have said in past issues, if you have something to say on this discussion regarding the relationship of a democratic public to higher education, let us hear from you. As Deborah Witte's article demonstrates, the editors of the *Exchange* listen.

References

- ¹ Peter Levine, "Public Intellectuals and the Influence of Economics," *Higher Education Exchange* (2001): 43-51.
- ² P. Christopher Smith, "The Uses of Aristotle in Gadamer's Recovery of Consultative Reasoning: *Sunesis*, *Sugnômê*, *Epieikeia*, and *Sumbouleusthai*," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 76, no. 2 (2000): 744.
- ³ Peter Levine, *Living Without Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 4.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 57.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ⁸ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), p. 218.

CONTRIBUTORS

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