

Practical Wisdom

THE RIGHT WAY TO DO THE RIGHT THING

Barry Schwartz
and Kenneth Sharpe

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*To Myrna Schwartz and Madeleine Thomson ,
with love and gratitude*

PART I

What Wisdom Is and Why We Need It

Introduction: The Need for Wisdom

We Americans are growing increasingly disenchanted with the institutions on which we depend. We can't trust them. They disappoint us. They fail to give us what we need. This is true of schools that are not serving our kids as well as we think they should. It is true of doctors who seem too busy to give us the attention and unhurried care we crave. It's true of banks that mismanage our assets, and of bond-rating agencies that fail to provide an accurate assessment of the risk of possible investments. It's true of a legal system that seems more interested in expedience than in justice. It's true of a workplace in which we fulfill quotas and hit targets and manage systems but wind up feeling disconnected from the animating forces that drew us to our careers in the first place.

If it were only patients, clients, and students who were dissatisfied, it would be easy to affix the blame on the doctors, lawyers, and teachers for not caring or for lacking the expertise to help. But the disenchantment we experience as recipients of services is often matched by the dissatisfaction of those who provide them. Most doctors want to practice medicine as it should be practiced. But they feel helpless faced with the challenge of balancing the needs and desires of patients with the practical demands of hassling with insurance companies, earning enough to pay malpractice premiums, and squeezing patients into seven-minute visits—all while keeping up with the latest developments in their fields. Most teachers want to teach kids the basics and at the same time excite them with the prospects of educating themselves. But teachers feel helpless faced with the challenge of reconciling these goals with mandates to meet targets on standardized tests, to adopt specific teaching techniques, and to keep up with the ever-increasing paperwork. No one is satisfied—not the professionals and not their clients.

So how are we to make things better? Generally we reach for one of two tools. The first tool is a set of rules and administrative oversight mechanisms that tell people what to do and monitor their performance to make sure they are doing it. The second tool is a set of incentives that encourage good performance by rewarding people for it. The assumption behind carefully constructed rules and procedures, with close oversight, is that even if people *do* want to do the right thing, they need to be told what that is. And the assumption underlying incentives is that people will not be motivated to do the right thing unless they have an incentive to do so. Rules and incentives. Sticks and carrots. What else is there?

There is no doubt that better rules and smarter incentives have an important role to play in improving the way our institutions perform. If you're trying to improve the quality of medical care while simultaneously reducing its costs, it's crazy to reward doctors for doing *more* procedures. And

you want to prevent banks from taking foolish risks with other people's money, it's crazy to let them speculate in whatever way they want, using enormous leverage, confident in the knowledge that if disaster strikes, the government will bail them out.

But rules and incentives are not enough. They leave out something essential. This book is about what that "something" is. It is what classical philosopher Aristotle called *practical wisdom*. (His word was *phronesis*). Without this missing ingredient, neither rules (no matter how detailed and well monitored) nor incentives (no matter how clever) will be enough to solve the problems we face.

The term *practical wisdom* sounds like an oxymoron to modern ears. We tend to think of "wisdom" as the opposite of "practical." Wisdom is about abstract, ethereal matters like "the way" or "the good" or "the truth" or "the path." And we tend to think that wisdom is something for sages, gurus, rabbis, and scholars—for white-bearded wizards like Harry Potter's mentor, Dumbledore. Aristotle's teacher Plato, shared this view that wisdom was theoretical and abstract, and the gift of only a few. But Aristotle disagreed. He thought that our fundamental social practices constantly demanded choices—like when to be loyal to a friend, or how to be fair, or how to confront risk, or when and how to be angry—and that making the right choices demanded wisdom. To take the example of anger, the central question for Aristotle was not whether anger was good or bad, or the abstract question about what the nature of the "good" in fact was. It was the particular and concrete issue of what to do in a *particular* circumstance: who to be angry at, for how long, in what way, and for what purpose. The wisdom to answer such questions and to act rightly was distinctly practical, not theoretical. It depended on our ability to *perceive* the situation, to have the appropriate *feelings* or desires about it, *deliberate* about what was appropriate in these circumstances, and to *act*.

Aristotle distilled the idea of practical wisdom in his classic book, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Ethics, said Aristotle, was not mainly about establishing moral rules and following them. It was about performing a particular social practice well—being a good friend or parent or doctor or soldier or citizen or statesman—and that meant figuring out the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time. This is what took practical wisdom. Aristotle's *Ethics* was not an abstract discourse on the human good or on "right" behavior. Its subject was what we needed to learn in order to succeed at our practices and to flourish as human beings. We needed to learn certain character traits like loyalty, self-control, courage, fairness, generosity, gentleness, friendliness, and truthfulness—a list that today would also include perseverance, integrity, open-mindedness, thoroughness, and kindness. Aristotle called these traits "excellences" (*arete*)—often translated as "virtues." But the master excellence—the virtue at the heart of his *Ethics*—was practical wisdom. None of these other traits could be exercised well without it.

Why "wisdom"? Why "practical"? Why not just a good set of rules to follow? Most experienced practitioners know that rules only take them so far. Rules can't tell practitioners how to do the constant interpretation and balancing that is part of their everyday work. Consider the doctor who has been well educated in the rules of how to practice medicine but is constantly called on to make more complicated decisions. How should such a doctor balance respect for the autonomy of her patients when it comes to making decisions with the knowledge that sometimes the patient is not the best judge of what is needed? How should the doctor balance empathetic involvement with each patient with the detachment needed to make sound judgments? How should the doctor balance the desire to spend enough time with each patient to be thorough, compassionate, and understanding with the need to see enough patients in a day to keep the office solvent? How should the doctor balance the desire to tell patients the truth, no matter how difficult, with the desire to be kind?

Doctors—and teachers attempting to teach *and* inspire, or lawyers attempting to provide proper

counsel *and* serve justice—are not puzzling over a choice between the “right” thing and the “wrong” thing. The common quandaries they face are choices among right things that clash, or between better and best, or sometimes between bad and worse. A good doctor needs to be honest with her patients, *and* kind to her patients, *and* to give them the hope they need to endure difficult treatments. But in diagnosing or treating a patient, these aims can be at odds, and the doctor must decide whether to be honest or kind, or more likely how to balance honesty and kindness in a way that is appropriate for the patient in front of her.

These sorts of quandaries don’t have pat, one-size-fits-all answers. Good rules might be useful as guides as we try to manage these multiple aims, but they will never be subtle enough and nuanced enough to apply in every situation. Aristotle recognized that balancing acts like these beg for wisdom and that abstract or ethereal wisdom would not do. Wisdom has to be practical, because the issues we face are embedded in our everyday work. They are not hypotheticals being raised in college ethics courses. They are quandaries that any practitioner must resolve in order to do her work well. Practical wisdom is not musing about how someone else in a hypothetical situation ought to act. It’s about “What am I to do?”—right here and right now, with this person. A practically wise person doesn’t merely speculate about what’s proper; she does it.

Acting wisely demands that we be guided by the proper aims or goals of a particular activity. Aristotle’s word for the purpose or aim of a practice was *telos*. The *telos* of teaching is to educate students; the *telos* of doctoring is to promote health and relieve suffering; the *telos* of lawyering is to pursue justice. Every profession—from banking to social work—has a *telos*, and those who excel are those who are able to locate and pursue it. So a good practitioner is motivated to aim at the *telos* of her practice. But it takes wisdom—practical wisdom—to translate the very general aims of a practice into concrete action.

People who are practically wise understand the *telos* of being a friend or a parent or a doctor and are motivated to pursue this aim. A wise practitioner wants to do the right thing not because of some monetary reward or punishment but because it is what being a good teacher or a good doctor demand. But aiming at the right thing is not sufficient. That’s why we say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Translating our aims into action demands expertise. Answering the question “What should I do?” almost always depends on the particulars of the situation. Friends, doctors, parents, and teachers all need to perceive what others are thinking and feeling. They need to imagine the consequences of what they do. They need to figure out what’s possible and not just what’s ideal. Practical wisdom is akin to the kind of skill that a craftsman needs to build a boat or a house, or that a jazz musician needs to improvise. Except that practical wisdom is not a technical or artistic skill. It is a moral skill—a skill that enables us to discern how to treat people in our everyday social activities.

So practical wisdom combines will with skill. Skill without will—without the desire to achieve the proper aims of an activity—can lead to ruthless manipulation of others, to serve one’s own interests, not theirs. And will without skill can lead to ineffectual fumbling around—the sort of thing we see in people who “mean well” but leave situations in worse shape than they found them.

How, then, are we to learn to be practically wise? There is no recipe, formula, or set of techniques. Skills are learned through experience, and so is the commitment to the aims of a practice. That’s why we associate wisdom with experience. But not just any experience will do. Some experiences nurture and teach practical wisdom; others corrode it. And it is here that Aristotle focuses our attention on something critically important: character and practical wisdom must be cultivated by the major institutions in which we practice. Aristotle wrote his book on ethics not simply to underline the importance of practical wisdom to a good life and a good society, but also to urge the citizens and

statesmen of the Athenian city-state to build institutions that encouraged citizens to learn to be practically wise. Faced with today's "wisdom deficit"—the lack of the wisdom we need to succeed in our daily life and work—he would urge us to examine whether our institutions are discouraging the wisdom of practitioners and, if so, what can be done to make up the deficit.

Aristotle would have had a hard time imagining the complexity and breadth of our contemporary institutions, but he would have understood the central problem that informs this book. The rules and incentives that modern institutions rely on in pursuit of efficiency, accountability, profit, and good performance can't substitute for practical wisdom. Nor will they encourage it or nurture it. In fact, they often corrode it.

Working for incentives is not the same as working to achieve the telos of an activity. A (good) doctor aims at recommending the right kind of treatment and has the know-how to tailor the treatment to this particular patient with this particular history and in these particular life circumstances. If we simply fix the problem of incentivizing doctors to do too much (rewarding them with a fee for any service) by paying doctors bonuses for doing less, they may end up doing too little. Worse, they may learn to make their decisions because of the incentives. We want doctors with the will and skill to do the right amount, and do it *because it's the right amount*. This goal can be achieved only if doctors embrace the proper aims of medicine and know how to pursue them. Incentives, even smart ones, will do little to help us reach this goal, and often, we'll see, they may move the goal farther away. Even with bankers, we want them to do the right thing because it's the right thing—because it serves the interests of the depositors who have trusted them with their money and borrowers who have trusted them to provide sound mortgages and loans. Our confidence in the banks depends on our trust in the bankers. We wouldn't fault bankers for being "greedy" if we thought the only point of banking was to make money. If we thought that, we'd call them "successful."

Rules cannot substitute for practical wisdom any more than incentives can. We need rules to guide and govern the behavior of people who are not wise: one reason we suffered the recent financial crisis was that weak and loosely enforced rules and regulations allowed bankers to run amok with shrewd moneymaking schemes like derivatives. But tighter rules and regulations, however necessary, are paltry substitutes for wisdom. Aristotle might say that we need rules to protect us from disaster. But at the same time, rules without wisdom are blind and at best guarantee mediocrity—forcing wise practitioners to become outlaws, rule-breakers pursuing a kind of guerrilla war to achieve excellence.

This book is about the urgency of making ourselves more practically wise and about the importance of institutional change if we are to learn how to do that. We can borrow some fundamental insights from Aristotle. But we'll need to do much more if we are going to understand the modern relevance of practical wisdom and the challenges faced by those who want to practice wisely.

We need to understand, in a modern context, what practical wisdom is, why we need it, and what it requires.

We need to examine, with help from insights from modern psychology, why practical wisdom is not the privileged preserve of wizards and sages. It is accessible to all of us. We are "born to be wise." And that capacity can be nurtured.

We need to see how the current reliance on strict rules and regulations and clever incentives to

improve practices like medicine, education, and law risks undermining the very wisdom of practitioners that is needed to make these practices better. Well-meaning reformers are often engaged in a kind of unintended stealth war on wisdom.

We absolutely must understand that the corrosion of wisdom is not inevitable. It can be resisted. There are legions of “canny outlaws” who struggle to find ways to exercise wisdom within organizations that actively discourage it. And there are growing ranks of system changers who have been able to reform the way institutions are run—how practitioners are trained and how they practice—in ways that nurture and sustain wisdom rather than destroy it.

And finally, again relying on research in psychology, we need to appreciate that cultivating wisdom is not only good for society but is, as Aristotle thought, a key to our own happiness. Wisdom isn’t just something we “ought” to have. It’s something we want to have to flourish.

Our central aim in writing a book about practical wisdom is to update the very old and often forgotten “excellence” of practical wisdom—to see why Aristotle thought of it as the master virtue that allows individuals and society to thrive. Currently, it is little mentioned in the academy, rarely mentioned in books about happiness or living well, and never mentioned in the public debate about how to heal and reform our major health care, educational, legal, and financial institutions. We want to make practical wisdom a part of our public discourse because it plays an essential part in making our modern practices and our own lives work well.

All too often, the diagnosis of the problems in the institutions that serve us is that people don’t really care about their work; they are blamed for just caring about making money, or gaining status, or amassing more power. And if greed, gain, and glory are all that motivate people, then it seems as if we have only two choices to induce them to do better: (a) design rules that will compel and enforce better performance; and (b) create incentives that will bribe people to do better work. It’s no accident, then, that our main focus in fixing the recent financial crisis has been more regulation, to prevent bad behavior, and better-crafted incentives, to get bankers and brokers to act more in the public interest. It’s no accident, then, that we think we can get better teaching by requiring teachers to follow scripted curricula tied to standardized tests and by punishing or rewarding them for their students’ performance. It’s no accident that we think we can get better and cheaper medical care by rewarding doctors for successful patient outcomes rather than medical procedures.

Rules and incentives are an inevitable and necessary part of our social and political life—the banking crisis would have been far less serious had Depression-era regulations not been removed and had existing regulations been enforced. For all the importance of rules and incentives, however, a debate that focuses only on the proper mix of these two mechanisms leaves out an important ingredient. The kind of work that most practitioners want to do, and that those they serve also want them to do, demands practical wisdom. Rules and incentives may improve the behavior of those who don’t care, though they won’t make them wiser. But in focusing on the people who don’t care—the targets of our rules and incentives—we miss those who do care. We miss those who want to do the right things but lack the practical wisdom to do them well. Rules and incentives won’t teach these people the moral skill and will they need. Even worse, rules can kill skill and incentives can kill will.

Aristotle called people who were practically wise *phronemoi*. Our grandparents would have called

such a person a mensch. This book is about what practical wisdom is and why we need it. It's about how we develop it and what threatens it. It's about how we can nurture and reclaim it and, in the process, reclaim the institutions that are now in so much trouble. And it's about how practical wisdom is a key to happiness.

What Wisdom Is: The Janitor and the Judge

THE WISE CUSTODIAN

Luke (we don't know his last name) works as a custodian in a major teaching hospital. In an interview with social scientists interested in studying how people structure their work, Luke reported an incident in which he cleaned a comatose young patient's room—twice. He had already done it once, but the patient's father, who had been keeping a vigil for months, hadn't seen Luke do it and had snapped at him. So Luke did it again. Graciously. Why? Here is how he explained it:

Luke: I kind of knew the situation about his son. His son had been here for a long time and . . . from what I hear, his son had got into a fight and he was paralyzed. That's why he got there, and he was in coma and he wasn't coming out of the coma . . . and I heard how he got that way. He had got into a fight with a black guy and the black guy really, well, you know, because he was here. Well . . . I went and cleaned his room. His father would stay here every day, all day, but he smoked cigarettes. So, he had went out to smoke a cigarette and after I cleaned the room, he came back up to the room. I ran in him in the hall, and he just freaked out . . . telling me I didn't do it. I didn't clean the room and all the stuff. And at first, I got on the defensive, and I was going to argue with him. But I don't know. Something caught me and I said, "I'm sorry. I'll go clean the room."

Interviewer: And you cleaned it again?

Luke: Yeah, I cleaned it so that he could see me clean it . . . I can understand how he could be. It was like six months that his son was here. He'd be a little frustrated, and so I cleaned it again. But I wasn't angry with him. I guess I could understand.

At first glance, the need for wisdom is not built into Luke's work as a custodian. Indeed, look at his job description:

- Operate carpet shampooing and upholstery cleaning equipment
- Operate mechanical cleaning and scrubbing equipment Strip and wax floor surfaces
- Maintain entrance area by performing such duties as sweeping, salting, and shoveling
- Clean grounds and area by performing such duties as picking up paper or trash
- Unplug commodes, urinals, and sink drains without dismantling the fixture
- Wet mop floors and stairways
- Operate vacuum cleaning equipment
- Clean and wax furniture, cases, fixtures, and furnishings
- Clean mirrors, interior side of exterior glass, and both sides of interior glass
- Clean toilet rooms and fixtures
- Stock restroom supplies
- Dust venetian blinds while standing on floor or stool
- Clean patient bedside equipment

Make beds and change linen
Collect and transport waste materials to central location
Wet mop small areas of floor or stairs to clean up such items as spilled liquid or food
Replace burned-out incandescent lightbulbs
Move and arrange furniture and furnishings
Collect and transport soiled linen to central location

Luke's job description says nothing about responsibility or care for patients. He has a long list of duties, but not a single item on it even mentions another human being. From this description, Luke could be working in a shoe factory or a mortuary instead of a hospital.

If Luke were doing *this* job, it would have been reasonable for him to have simply explained to the father that he'd already cleaned the room, and perhaps to have brought in his supervisor to mediate if the father remained angry. Luke might have ignored the man and just gone about his business. He might have gotten angry himself.

But Luke was doing a different job. That's what a team of research psychologists found when they conducted in-depth interviews with Luke and other hospital custodians about their jobs at a major midwestern academic hospital. The researchers had asked the custodians to talk about their jobs, and the custodians began to tell them stories about what they did. Luke's stories told them that his "official" duties were only one part of his *real* job, and that another, central, part of his job was to make the patients and their families feel comfortable, to cheer them up when they were down, to encourage them and divert them from their pain, to give them a willing ear if they felt like talking. Luke aimed to do something different from mere custodial work.

What Luke aimed at would have grabbed Aristotle's attention. Aristotle laid great stress on the importance of the aims—the *telos*—of practices like medical care. The aims of the practice—promoting health, curing illness, relieving suffering—need to be embodied in the institution where that practice takes place. Hospitals need to make promoting health their primary aim; it's the soul of the organization. The practitioners—the hospital staff—need to understand that aim and be encouraged to make it their aim too. To make wise choices at work, these practitioners need to aim at caring for the patients; they need to be motivated by this aim, as Luke was. Aristotle would have talked about the importance of practitioners desiring the right thing if they were to do their work well. Aiming at the right thing doesn't tell them exactly how to do it—that takes practical skill, not just will. But knowing what to aim at frames and guides their choices—it enables them to choose wisely.

The amazing thing the researchers discovered about Luke and many of his coworkers was that they understood and internalized these aims in spite of their official job description, not because of it. The job they were actually doing was one they had crafted for themselves in light of the aims of medical care. Mike, another custodian, told the researchers how he stopped mopping the hallway floor because Mr. Jones, recovering from major surgery, was out of his bed getting a little much-needed exercise by walking slowly up and down the hall. Charlayne told them about how she ignored her supervisor's admonitions and refrained from vacuuming the visitors' lounge while some family members, who were there all day, every day, happened to be napping. These custodians crafted their jobs with the central purpose of the hospital in mind. They were not generic custodians; they were *hospital* custodians. They saw themselves as playing an important role in an institution whose aim was to see to the care and welfare of patients. So when Luke was confronted by the angry father and he had to decide what to do, he could not look it up in his official job description, because the rules that define his job said nothing about situations like this. What guided him was the aim of the job he had crafted

JUDGMENT DAY

“Michael’s case appeared routine,” explained Judge Lois Forer. When he was brought before the Criminal Division of Philadelphia’s Court of Common Pleas, he was “a typical offender: young, black and male, a high-school dropout without a job.... And the trial itself was, in the busy life of a judge, a run-of-the-mill event.” The year before Michael had held up a taxi driver while brandishing a gun. He took \$50. Michael was caught and tried. “There was no doubt that Michael was guilty,” said Forer. She needed to mete out punishment. She turned to the state’s sentencing guidelines. They recommended a minimum sentence of twenty-four months. The law seemed clear. Until Forer looked at the particular circumstances. The gun that Michael brandished, Forer explained, was a toy gun. Further, this was his first offense:

Although he had dropped out of school to marry his pregnant girl-friend, Michael later obtained a high school equivalency diploma. He had been steadily employed, earning enough to send his daughter to parochial school—a considerable sacrifice for him and his wife. Shortly before the holdup, Michael had lost his job. Despondent because he could not support his family, he went out on a Saturday night had more than a few drinks, and then robbed the taxi.

Judge Forer thought that the twenty-four-month sentence was disproportionate. But the sentencing guidelines allow a judge to deviate from the prescribed sentence if she writes an opinion explaining the reasons. “I decided to deviate from the guidelines,” she explained, sentencing Michael to eleven and a half months in the county jail and permitting him to work outside the prison during the day to support his family:

I also imposed a sentence of two years probation following his imprisonment conditioned upon repayment of the \$50. My rationale for the lesser penalty, outlined in my lengthy opinion, was that this was a first offense, no one was harmed, Michael acted under the pressures of unemployment and need, and he seemed truly contrite. He had never committed a violent act and posed no danger to the public. A sentence of close to a year seemed adequate to convince Michael of the seriousness of his crime.

Luke’s choice of how to confront the angry father and Forer’s choice of the appropriate punishment for Michael couldn’t seem more different. Forer’s work as a judge demands that she interpret general rules in particular circumstances. She needs to know when and how to make an exception. She needs to know how to craft a punishment to fit a person and the circumstances. Wisdom is at the heart of what she does, if it is to be done well. It’s what we need, and what we expect, in judges—the ability to exercise judgment. And judicial wisdom is profoundly practical. Forer could not do her work well without it. And neither could Luke.

Forer was committed to finding a just punishment for Michael, but there were competing aims—a legitimate ones—that she had to sort out and balance. It was right that Michael receive a punishment that fit the crime and that the community be protected from any danger he might pose. But it was also right that Michael be rehabilitated so that he would not commit another offense upon release. And it was important that Michael’s sentence do minimal harm to his wife and children, and to his chances

of being reintegrated into the community. For Lois Forer, judging was a balancing act. She had to balance retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation. She had to balance justice and mercy.

And when the angry father confronted him, Luke also had to sort out conflicting aims. There were other legitimate things he might have chosen to do. Be honest: tell the father he had cleaned the room already. Be courageous: stand up to the father's anger and refuse the unfair demand to clean the room again. But Luke had to determine how to balance these competing aims in this circumstance.

Aristotle knew that figuring out what to do in situations like the ones faced by Luke and Judge Forer demanded more than just knowledge of "the facts." It demanded more than knowledge of the law and the rules and the job description. It demanded more than knowing how to deduce the right thing to do from a set of abstract principles about truth or justice or freedom or goodness. There was no general rule or principle to which Forer or Luke could turn to balance or choose among several good aims that were in conflict. To do this kind of balancing and choosing, Luke and Forer needed wisdom. They needed practical moral skill.

Aristotle emphasized two capacities that were particularly important for such practical skill—the ability to *deliberate* about such choices and the ability to *perceive* what was morally relevant in a particular circumstance. Good deliberation and discernment were at the heart of practical wisdom. Forer articulates how she deliberated about Michael's case. A good judge needs to do this all the time in publicly defending her decisions, and in Michael's case the law demanded that she explain why she was deviating from the recommended sentence.

Luke's deliberation took place in radically different circumstances—in a situation in which we largely expect neither wisdom nor nuanced accountability—but it is equally important, if not more important, to consider both how he deliberated and how he talked about his decision. He figured out that the confrontation with the father was not one that should be framed in terms of honesty and integrity, nor as a defense of Luke's rights. Although Luke was tempted to react to the father's demands as an issue of injustice, he quickly saw that something else was at stake—helping to comfort and heal the sick and injured. So Luke framed the issue as one of how to care for and sustain the relationship of *this* father and *this* son at *this* particular trying moment in their lives. Justice and fairness could wait for another day.

And Luke's deliberation went further. He also had to figure out what courses of action were possible in this situation. Should he calmly explain to the father that he recognized the father's pain and understood? Should he offer to sit down and discuss the situation? Luke chose not to make an issue of it, not to fuel the father's anger. He decided that the best and most practical way to handle the situation was to clean the room again and to let the father think he'd accomplished something for his son. Luke had the skill to respond generously and with good grace.

When we think about deliberative skills, the first image that often comes to mind is a process in which we lay out the options, weigh the pros and cons, and then pick what seems best. All of us have deliberated this way. Courses in business and management schools often teach this method as the model of good decision making. This kind of decision making can be particularly useful when we are faced with new or tough problems and have the time to ponder them. But Luke's behavior makes us think about other kinds of deliberative skills.

Luke did not lay out conflicting aims or weigh the pros and cons of all the options. What was important for Luke was how to frame the situation. The unreasonableness of the request and the father's anger may have tempted Luke to frame the situation as one about honesty, rights, or justice, but instead he framed it in light of the job as he had crafted it, the way he saw the purpose of being a hospital custodian. And Luke's ability to do this was enabled by a capacity he had for good storytelling. Luke could tell himself, and the interviewer, a narrative about this patient who "had got into a fight" and about an upset father who had been visiting him, caring for him, for months. This story, and the frame it provided, enabled Luke to discern what to do. Luke wasn't laying out options. And he wasn't simply deducing what to do from some general principle of proper behavior (like "be kind to patients' families"). The story Luke told explained how the father came to be yelling at Luke to clean the room again, why the anger made sense, and why it was forgivable. And *this* story helped Luke figure out his role in the evolving narrative. Our ability to frame situations well and tell good stories is critical to practical moral skill. So, too, is the ability to use analogies and metaphors to draw on our past experiences. Luke knew what to do not because he had done exactly the same thing before but because he could draw on previous experiences that were something like the current situation. He knew what the consequences had been of actions he had taken in these past cases. He wasn't just repeating what he'd always done; he was crafting something new from what had or had not worked in the past.

This may seem like making a lot of Luke's instant decision, but Judge Forer used the same deliberative skills. To interpret the law in Michael's case she needed more than the facts, more than the legal guidelines, and more than the ability to make logical deductions. She needed to create an accurate narrative that made sense of Michael's actions and his intentions in light of his character and circumstances—his stable family and work history, the job crisis and the depression he was going through, the nature of the crime and choice of weapon, the harm done—all this to judge the seriousness of his crime and the severity of his punishment. She understood Michael by drawing on her past experience, by interpreting the similarities and differences he shared with other criminals she had judged.

Aristotle tells us that "in matters concerning action and questions of what is beneficial, the agent must consider on each different occasion what the situation demands, just as in medicine and in navigation." Figuring out what is appropriate in a particular situation rests on *moral perception*. "A man of practical wisdom," argued Aristotle, must "take cognizance of particulars." Particular facts are the "starting points" for our knowledge of "the goal of action" and, to deliberate and choose well, "one must have perception of particular facts." Every day in court, Judge Forer had to sort through a deluge of information about the lives of the defendants and the nature of their misdeeds. To determine motives, to parcel out responsibility, to understand how this crime was different from or similar to others, to determine the future danger to the community—these tasks demanded an ability to pick what was significant out of a lot of background noise. These tasks demanded an ability to see the nuance—the gray—of a particular situation, and not simply the black-and-white of the legal and the illegal.

Luke, too, was faced daily with patients who were upset, confused, disoriented, troubled; who were experiencing multiple and contradictory emotions. When he was confronted with choices about how to care for such people, just like judges, doctors, lawyers, therapists, or teachers, Luke had to sort through a welter of information and figure out which things were the most important to deal with in the moment. A critical part of the context that Luke had to perceive was what the father was thinking and feeling. If Luke had been unable to discern this, he wouldn't have had a clue about what the

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