OLD IDEAS:

WISDOM, VIRTUE AND MORAL FORMATION

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Abstract

The wisdom writings of the Old Testament may be regarded as largely a repository of 'old ideas' that were preserved across cultures and ages because they generally served human life. To study the material from this angle, focusing less on reconstructing the past and more on serving the present, will require several adjustments to usual scholarly approaches. Comparisons going beyond Israel's Umwelt will also be fruitful. Comparisons with the teachings of Confucius and Aristotle may be particularly helpful. Such studies have to be respectfully critical, taking the sages of the past seriously as interlocutors while recognizing the limits of their vision.

Key Words: Wisdom; Virtue; Aristotle; Confucius; Human Flourishing; Proverbs

Old Ideas and Ancient Road Beds

I regard Bob Dylan's *Modern Times* and Leonard Cohen's *Old Ideas* as the two most significant recent contributions to popular music: that says something about my taste and much about my age. I live in modern times with old ideas: that merely says that I am human. One overlooks the prevalence of old ideas in human life when one is surrounded by academic works that seem to teem with new ideas. Yet of these many are not as new as they are painted, while among others infant mortality takes a dreadful toll. A minority are nursed to maturity – by older ideas.

In discussing Freud, Manès Sperber illustrates how the new and the old become entangled. Having first said that Freud was a revolutionary thinker who instilled in his circle a nearly pathological *Originalitätssucht* (1970:44,57), he shows later what role the old played in Freud's theory and life (294ff). The disconcerting nub of Freud's novel theory was exactly that we are never rid of our past: the primeval, unchanging *id,* the societal heritage constituting our *superego* and our repressed past in the unconscious *ego.* The conscious *ego*, the sole source of potential change, can at best negotiate compromises with this massive burden of the past. The soft, persistent voice of *logos*, does effect change, but does so slowly and incrementally (cf. Freud 1948:377f).[1]

Those who, with a nod at Marx, protest that humans are radically historical beings may note the Marxist critic Mulhern's warning that those who reduce history to change purvey a 'confusing half-truth' (1992:22). He speaks of "a plurality of rhythms and tempos, some highly variable, some ... belonging to the practical eternity of 'deep time'" and refers to

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[1] Consider also Francis Bacon, author of four books calling for innovation, who noted down ideas old and new in a commonplace book. His essays, the only works of his still frequently read, are replete with gnomic sentences.

"our common and relatively stable reality as a natural species" (33). In this regard Kenneth Burke (1968:105) says that 'the body is dogmatic' and Freud, less cautiously, that anatomy is destiny. But there are also 'semi-constants' of social life. As Burke (1968:79) points out by way of analogy, our new highways often follow quite closely ancient road beds. Our ancestors, perceiving the lie of the land, identified the convenient routes across rivers and mountains and to sources of sustenance.[2] We follow, not because we are traditionalists, but because our needs are not radically different.

Behavioural scientists have given these insights a scientific – or pseudo-scientific – slant by invoking memes. Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1993:25) apply the term to "concepts relating to the evaluation of human behaviour … that have been used for many centuries under very different social and historical conditions" and that must thus be assumed to have "adaptive value for humankind". These survive because they provide "directions [road beds] for human thought and behaviour" (26). Speaking of wisdom as a meme, they conclude that, from the evolutionary perspective "the ancient equation of wisdom and virtue is still viable" (34).[3]

'Old Ideas' as a Lens on Old Testament Wisdom

Old ideas seen as old road beds are not so much relics of antiquity as indices of sempeternal features of our social landscape. Those who know the lie of the land traverse it more efficiently. In that they know the paths and obstacles, they have wisdom; in that they are thereby enabled, they have virtue in the broadest sense. If we study Old Testament wisdom as *largely* a body of old ideas,[4] a significant shift in focus is needed. I discuss this under five headings.

i) In seeing an ancient roadway, one may ask *how* or *why* it came to be. Which question we ask depends on our purpose. Genetic questions about wisdom, designed to flesh out our picture of the past; require delving into the history of ancient Israel and its *Umwelt*. A desire to find our own way through life forces us to see the problems and possible solutions as the ancients saw them.[5] If, then, analogies to Israelite proverbs crop up in an older source *or in a younger source from a distant culture*, the proverbs, being old ideas in my sense, may be studied comparatively 'across continents and centuries' (Mulhern 1992:22). Since analogies are seldom perfect, such a study will note both 'invariant components' across the traditions and 'possible variations in response to differing conditions' (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1993:25). The old roadbed will be our point of departure, even if, following Burke's double reading of 'point of departure' (1952:53), we find it *wise* to deviate from the old track. We do not deviate or,

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[2]   This does not imply that such old ideas are in a narrow sense empirical (see Von Rad 19723f; Fox 2007b). But Fox underestimates the experiential component and overestimates the element of coherence, therefore his explanation of the 'anomaly proverbs' (2007b:682f) is somewhat unsatisfactory, as is his argument that in Proverbs all virtues are seen as one (2007a:85) and that virtue is *knowledge* (2007a:77ff, conflating wisdom and knowledge). Compare Westermann's view on common sense "*conditioned by* ... the wisdom of the fathers" (1995:49, my emphasis).

[3]   Here caution is needed; see below.

[4]   Other forms of wisdom are based on arcane knowledge of divine origin entrusted to an elite – kings and favourites or specialists in mantic arts – see Beaulieu (2007) and Van der Toorn (2007). Daniel's wisdom comes through revelation (cf. Grabbe 1995:160); Ben-Sirach's Torah wisdom is different, as Van der Toorn (2007:28) admits.

[5]   Those who call for a practical appropriation of biblical wisdom include Davis (2009) and Cervantes-Ortiz (2011).

what is worse, fail to understand the old line of thought simply because ours is a different culture.[6]

ii) Other questions concern the *Sitz im Leben* of the wisdom tradition and the class position of the sages. Since those whose 'career paths' compel them to frequent specific routes require beacons and maps that others hardly need, one may surmise, when some routes are extensively mapped, that the maps served a specific group's interest. Many have done sterling work along these lines, even if much remains speculative.[7] But the wise precepts that I call old ideas seldom fit only one professional profile. "Even the president of the United States must sometimes have to stand naked" is Bob Dylan's version of a serviceable old idea. Thus court officials, being wise and needing, like all others, counsel on how to cope with 'nakedness', would surely have taken whatever tips were on offer, sometimes polishing popular sayings to make them *hoffähig*. Natalie Zemon Davis (1975:229ff) shows how this was done in early modern Europe. Therefore a sociological consistency at odds with social reality should not be forced onto the wisdom tradition. If the wisdom writings provided, in Kenneth Burke's phrase (1973:293ff), 'equipment for living' and did so successfully, borrowings 'upwards', appropriations 'downwards' and exchanges 'sideways' would have been natural.[8] Perhaps this is why Murphy (1981:3; cf. Von Rad 1972:81f) said that the wisdom approach "was shared by all Israelites in varying degree".

iii) The question of genre is best handled under two headings. First, genre does and does not determine content. Proverbs, common to all cultures, may be compared to 'points of orientation' (Davis 2009:266) or 'indispensible signposts' (Von Rad 1972:26) by which people steer their course. A detailed route map indicating precise paths is another kettle of fish, as is a topographical map of which the details indicate that the longer route is easier than the shorter one. Though the proverb, eminently suited to oral cultures, cannot capture sets of relationships as well as a discursive treatise of literary cultures can, its very lack of precision makes it more flexible. When the user of the discursive map is baffled by a blockage in the charted road, the user of proverbs may improvise a route by referring to landmarks.[9]

In spite of these differences and the tendency of each group to use entrenched or fashionable genres, one has to remember that often the same landscape has to be

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[6]   The notion that *all* wisdom as a cultural construct functions *only* within a cultural system does not stand up to serious scrutiny. "A genuine subjective difference between cultures would be undetectable" (Burke 1968:86).

[7]   I intend to examine this matter in another article. Among many recent contributions, see Weeks 1994:41-56; 74-91; Blenkinsopp 1995:11-41; Grabbe 1995:168-180; Westermann 1995: *passim*; Fox 1996; Golka 1996; Whybray 1996; Crenshaw 1998:20-26; Loader 1999; Dell 2006:18-89; 2009:230ff; Ashberry 2011:2ff and *passim*; Sneed 2011. In view of Golka's distinction between context of origin and of collection and writing (1996:67), there is a strong case for identifying different *original* settings for different parts of the wisdom books (Dell 2006:15). Perhaps one can identify a single *discourse* setting, as Ansberry (2011:77ff, 184ff and *passim*) tries to do, but he vitiates his case by conflating 'courtly' and 'aristocratic'. Probably Sneed (2011:71) is correct in saying that 'scribal scholars' were responsible for *writing down* the material – and most other parts of the Old Testament!

[8]   Cervantes-Ortiz (2011:81ff), citing Lópes, argues that what had once been borrowed by the upper classes from the people can once more be borrowed back by the people. This, he says, is happening in Latin America.

[9]   Aristotle, a pioneer of the discursive form, recognized that the precision of his chosen form came with a price tag. Sometimes he pointedly abandons precision in order to retain contextual flexibility, for instance, in the introduction to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I:3) and in his treatment of the virtue of generosity (IV:1). Ansberry (2010:167) rightly points out that both Aristotle and Proverbs recognize 'the limitation of moral rules'. Today the *topos* of flexibility is best known in the formulation of Emerson: A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.

traversed. Whereas *forms* of politeness differ greatly from culture to culture, *standards* of politeness are ubiquitous. Thus we should not expect too much from the study of 'wisdom genres', for wisdom can be expressed in many ways.[10] The sages "were not slaves to mechanical laws of genre" (Ansberry 2011:382), but borrowing established forms and apparently also improvised. Job is the copybook example, but note too that the genres *employed in* Qoheleth do not *constitute* the book in its present form. Formal features such as genre markers seldom allow us to distinguish old ideas from new challenges to old ideas and proverbs of the community from aphorisms of the individual.

iv) Genre is also invoked when one asks whether portions of the Old Testament outside the wisdom books are derived from the wisdom tradition. Are there wisdom psalms and wisdom narratives? Can wisdom influence be traced in the prophetic books? The apparently evasive answer 'yes and no' makes good sense if we start with people travelling through life, with occasional stops to contemplate, share a joke or make a wry aside, instead of with a discrete social *Schicht* tied to its professional ethos and set of genres, each with divinely decreed markers.

The wise, if they were a distinct class in Israel, must have comprised wisdom teachers and their pupils. Would teachers not have used fables,[11] parables and extended metaphors in their teaching and would these not have found their way into other texts? Even more probably their pupils produced most parts of the Old Testament, drawing on their training in doing so. Beyond even this one has to consider that the word חכמה *and the conception of wisdom* are too wide to allow restriction to a professional class (cf. Grabbe 1995:162, 169ff). Popular conceptions of wisdom and popular styles of imparting wisdom could have shaped even the terminologies and practices of the professionals How, then, is one to trace 'wisdom influence' in a particular text apart from saying that the text seems to have a didactic purpose and embodies some wise precepts?[12]

Both 2 Samuel 17:1-14 and Judges 11:15-27 exemplify 'wisdom in practice'. Jephtah's letter, which differs from the rest of the narrative in its formal tone and verbal artistry (plays on forms of גרש), was clearly meant to portray Jephtah as a worthy leader, a polished rhetorician and a wise negotiator. Do these passages stem from one of the sages? In that they intend to portray wisdom, they have to seem wise to readers, yet they do not inculcate or purvey old ideas. They simply illustrate how resourceful those who 'know their way around' can be in specific situations.

v) Rhetorical fashions and artistic originality shape old ideas without always obliterating their substance or function. When disgruntled workers today call for 'transformation' they often want pretty much what mediaeval workers wanted when they called for "the

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[10]   This is the conclusion of Blenkinsopp (1983:17-40; similarly Grabbe 1995:169). Some recent discussions of the issue do not really get us further than this (Crenshaw 1998:26ff; Hunter 2006:21ff; 31ff). For a telling critique of some formalistic views of genre, see Exum (2005) and Sneed (2011).

[11]   There is a close relationship between the proverb and the didactic narrative: the narrative can exemplify the proverb and the proverb can summarize the narrative (cf. Westermann 1995:168n18). Note the 'proverbs' that summarize De la Fontaine's fables.

[12]   Therefore Crenshaw (2005:115) rightly says that the "labeling of words and expressions as sapiential serves no useful purpose" and calls for attention to "*functional* similarities and differences among genres". This does not invalidate Brown's project (2005) of tracing of wisdom *topoi* in some psalms, for Brown (2005:99ff) also notes that some *topoi* of the psalms are absent from wisdom literature.

restoration of ancient rights and liberties".[13] To market their reforms, Confucius invoked the authority of the ancients (*Analects* 7:1) and Nietzsche messianic imagery. Rhetorical critics should be the last to take rhetorical strategies at face value.[14]

Doubtless many wise sayings of little practical use survived primarily because they were apt and aesthetically pleasing. If instruction is conceived of narrowly, one has to agree with Westermann (1995:143) that not all proverbs were used in instruction. Yet all journeys include stops. Job 28, of little value as a long-winded way of confirming an old saying, has contemplative and aesthetic qualities that outweigh the 'solution' in the closing verses. Some proverbs (17:12;22:22, etc.) offer wry comments rather than solutions to problems (cf. Clifford 2009:252). But is it not a sign of strength to contemplate with equanimity life's mysteries and with a rueful smile life's intractable problems (see Burke 1952:318f,441f)? Some texts, though not didactic, form character, and, though not moral, maintain morale.[15] Of course we need not share Israel's ideas about what is beautiful, apt or comic.

Works of exceptional merit transgress boundaries of genre and function. The rubrics 'Greek tragedy' and 'Elizabethan tragedy' do scant justice to Sophocles's *Antigone* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* respectively, although in a sense they belong there. Whatever we choose to call Job, it is more than the title awarded to it. For instance, the pathos and artistry of Eliphaz's first speech exceeds the requirements of the plots.[16] But in spite of his deft wit, Qoheleth never gets beyond old ideas. He is subversive in the most pregnant sense: in turning old wisdom on its head, he reinstates it in reverse (cf. Perdue 1990:474f). No wonder parallels to Qoheleth are widespread.

The Roads We Cannot Avoid Taking

In arguing for non-relative values, Martha Nussbaum (1993:245) identifies in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* a number of almost universally shared 'spheres of human experience' in which "any human being will have to make *some* choices rather than others". For the sake of brevity, I do not list the spheres or the virtues pertinent to each. Arguably the list is neither complete nor eternal. Radically different social arrangements may necessitate changes to the list, as Nussbaum (1993:267) concedes. Nevertheless, as it stands the list covers much of what was crucial to human social life then and has remained so till today; it bears no strong imprint of a particular culture or time.

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[13] When the source of succour was seen to lie in the past, one sometimes had to go far back to get at it: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" (14th century).

[14] Sperber avoids the mistake when he compares the 'magical therapist' of traditional societies and the modern psychotherapist, both of whom seek to free people of the burden of the past. The difference, he says, 'ist nicht gar gross', as one notices "sobald man den Unterschied zwischen den Jargons, ... die enorme Differenz zwischen den *Konkretisierungsdialekten*, bereinigt hat" (1970:197f, his emphasis).

[15] Compare also the sayings from across the world that fall under the rubric "there's nowt as queer as folk", for instance, Proverbs 20:14 and the anonymous French saying: *Cet animal est très méchant, quand on l'attaque, il se défend.* Such sayings help us to acquire what Burke (1952:318,442) calls an attitude of 'neo-Stoical comtemplation' in which we look quizzically at 'the Human Barnyard'. If this is not wisdom, what is?

[16] In *Antigone* Haemon jumps the frame in this way. The socially conservative Sophocles sides with Antigone and her appeal to old values. She speaks for his heart. But probably Haemon, to whom Sophocles gratuitously assigns the voice of 'sweet reason', speaks from his head. He represents an *acceptable* alternative to an honour culture rendered obsolete by social change. If this is so, we are beyond the conventional structure of Greek tragedy.

The same cannot be said of Aristotle's account of the individual virtues. As Nussbaum (1993:247) points out, we can, without committing ourselves, agree on the *nominal* (thin) definition of what constitutes virtue in each sphere: the disposition to act in the way appropriate to that sphere.[17] When it comes to the further specifications of what is appropriate, the 'thick' definitions, opinions differ. In this respect Aristotle's opinions are debatable, that is, open to a debate in which the participants, while they disagree, know *what* they are disagreeing about. They have the same journey in mind and are arguing about the best route to take – which might not be the one recommended by Aristotle.[18] Precisely where such disagreements occur, one may look forward to fruitful debate leading to moral progress (Nussbaum 1993:248f).[19]

Nussbaum (1993:251ff) alertly foresees possible objections to her view and deftly counters them. For instance, though all people have to decide on how to distribute scarce resources and thus agree *nominally* on the need for justice, the debate may flounder on fundamentally different specifications of justice. I shall not rehearse her rejoinders or my own similar ones. It is enough to say that the theory of 'incommensurable paradigms' looks less and less plausible in the light of increasingly sophisticated social research. Indeed, the theory is beginning to look otherworldly and obscurantist. That it often amounts to a counsel of despair should be obvious.

My concern, unlike Nussbaum's, is not with morality in the strict sense, but with *virtue* in its widest sense, with the various 'strengths' people need to cope with life. Some are needed to deal with cultural specifics; many are needed to deal with generically human situations.[20] And even those deeply rooted in culturally specific conditions will more often than not have functional analogues in other cultures. Those most sensitive to cultural differences will be least likely to surrender to lazy forms of cultural relativism. They should also, I maintain, not surrender supinely to a 'cultural imperative' that uncritically validates the new as opposed to the old. If we find ourselves willy-nilly on journeys that others in other times and places have had to undertake, unwillingness to take note of the beacons they spotted and the road beds they prepared will be either arrogant or foolish – and the Old Testament links these two (Fox 2007b:681).[21]

A modern insight – probably quite old – is of help here: scholars are not disengaged observers, though their engagement takes different forms. Scholars may study the ancient sages without the least interest in becoming wise – to cement or enhance their position within the academy or to expand our knowledge of the past. Though I do not despise the desire for pure knowledge, the desire to learn from others how to find one's own way in the world and among other people is surely also valid. If understanding across centuries can be improved, understanding across contemporary boundaries may also be increased. At least one may learn to contemplate without fanaticism, excessive anger or permanent melancholy the queerness of folk.

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[17]   And probably also with Aristotle's view that 'appropriate behaviour' will generally mean 'avoiding both excess and deficiency' (*EN* II:6).

[18]   Nussbaum (1993:250) notes that Christians will not accept Aristotle's view of *megalopsuchia* (*EN* VI:3). The verdict of non-Christians such as Bertrand Russell has been equally negative (Hardie 1980:119).

[19]   Thus CS Lewis (2009:loc 401), speaking of natural law, says: "Some criticism, some removal of contradictions, even some real development is required" – but within the existing framework.

[20]   This includes providing for certain material necessities, as Crenshaw (2007:101ff) points out.

[21]   "To ignore the hard-won insights of the past about issues that are vital for survival is like blinding ourselves on purpose out of false pride" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1993:25).

The Greeks divided the arts into the theoretical (*theoretikê*), which seek to understand things, the productive (*poetikê*), which issue in products separate from the producer, and the practical (*praktikê*), which manifest themselves in practices brought to excellence. Quintillian (I:41-43), speaking of oratory in particular, argues that, though a practical art requires some natural aptitude and much practice, it also involves a teachable body of knowledge. Tacitly Aristotle says much the same about ethics. There are manifestly many theoretical studies of Old Testament wisdom. Others seem to have been written mainly so as to be marketable products conforming to accepted standards of craftsmanship. Very few, I fear, went beyond theoretical acumen and the requirements of the academic craft in their quest for the virtue of wisdom.

A Road Not Yet (Quite) Taken

When William Brown viewed Israelite wisdom literature from the angle of character formation some years ago, he spoke of a 'fresh approach' (1996:20). Actually, others had made similar suggestions before; what I am suggesting here hardly qualifies as a new idea.[22] Yet Brown's study, though praised in some circles, had little impact. True, some of his views invited criticism, but precisely these weaknesses could, in another climate of thought, have led to a fruitful debate on how to work out more adequately his basic thesis. In his introduction, Brown refers a few times to Aristotle's view of virtues and briefly to Aquinas and other writers on virtue ethics. References to extra-biblical Ancient Near Eastern wisdom are few. Since he examines essentially the Old Testament material in conversation with scholars in this field, his is not – and does not pretend to be – a comparative study, though his thematic introduction invites comparisons.

If the Old Testament wisdom writings constitute *in main* a repository of old ideas, more extensive comparisons would be useful precisely to the type project Brown (1996:1) envisages – a project to overcome the 'chasm' separating academic scholarship from theological reflection. One promising project would be to juxtapose Old Testament wisdom (and its Ancient Near Eastern counterparts), Confucian wisdom (and its Taoist counterpart), Aristotelian wisdom and African wisdom, though it would require expertise far beyond mine.[23] Here I restrict myself to preliminary survey of possibilities offered by the Old

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[22]   Von Rad (1970:64; cf. Davis 2009:272f) recognized that wisdom deals with character rather than intellect.

[23]   The comparison suggests itself because it is becoming obvious that sapiential ethics was a form of virtue ethics (Von Rad 1972:79; Ansberry 2010:157) and Aristotle and Confucius were the two other major exponents of this form of ethics in the ancient world. Some have already noted the parallels and a few have explored some of them in more detail. When Von Rad (1972:269) says that Israel searched for the 'rational rule' the reference is, as the footnote indicates, to Aristotle's *orthos logos*. Fox (2007a) compared the ethics of Proverbs with that of Socrates, arguing that both equates wisdom and virtue. Ansberry (2010:159ff) rightly objected that this equation is not found in the Israelite material. He finds more links with Aristotle's ethics, since Aristotle also disagreed with Socrates on this point. Having noted a number of resemblances (166ff), he also identifies three significant differences (168ff). Ching (1993:69) asserts that Confucianism "offers many parallels...to the wisdom tradition of the Hebrews". May Ni (2009:311) reviews recently written books comparing Confucian and Aristotelian ethics by May Sim and and Yu Jiyuan, stating that no systematic comparative study had existed before.

Testament, Aristotelian and Confucian[24] material, leaving the African material to the others.[25]

Though the presence of parallels always requires explanation, mere parallel hunting is sterile. Yearly (1993:234), who finds 'remarkable similarities within differences' in Aristotle, Christian Aristotelianism and Confucianism, remains aware of the differing systems behind the similarities. His view that the shared theme of human flourishing, found also in African thought according to Magesa (1997:52), renders comparison to useful links with my argument that old ideas span times and cultures because they serve human life. Since human life never was Edenic, differences are as significant as similarities. If old ideas received everywhere the imprint of the local, a systematic study of local differences may help us to appropriate old ideas more critically.

I suggest that the following themes – there may be many more – call for investigation:

i) Regarding the scope of wisdom and virtue, there is much to confirm the popular notion that reality is articulated differently in different cultures. Yet a comparison suggests that this does not mean that people from these cultures inhabit different worlds. Aristotle, with his systematic treatment of subjects, is of great help here. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he deals with matters that we would classify under good manners rather than ethics, as do Confucius (particularly *Analects* X) and the Israelite sages, but the others' wry comments on human quirks and foibles are largely absent. They are, however, found in the *Rhetoric* (see, for instance, I:5-7,11; II:2-14). Similarly, reflections on ruling, family life and education are found in the *Politics*. Even *Of the Soul* and the *Topics* deal at times with themes found in the *Analects* and the Israelite material.

Scholars point out that certain aspects of Confucian teaching, the strong emphasis on ritual or correct manners (*li*), for instance, found their corrective in Taoism (Smith 1994:124) and that in practice many Chinese were Confucians in public and Taoists in private and sometimes Buddhists in religion (Ching 1993:222f; Smith 1994:119f).[26] Such and other examples could indicate that it is misguided to isolate Israelite wisdom and the supposed 'worldview of the sages'[27] from other aspects of Israelite life. The living world, differently compartmentalized, might have looked much the same to all the sages, except for a few plagued by the hobgoblin of small minds. But then none of the sages ever regarded such extremists as wise.

ii) This is linked to the awareness, found among all the sages, of human limitations, particularly regarding human knowledge and virtue. Confucius steadfastly denied that he was a sage (*sheng*) (*Analects* VII:25,33; IX:7) or that he knew precisely what *jen* is

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24 I cite only from the *Analects* (excepting the anti-Confucian Book XVIII), but without judging how much – if any – of the material derives from Confucius. I use the old Wade-Giles system of transcription rather than the officially recommended Pinyun system because I am barely acquainted with the latter.

25 The link between biblical and African proverbs, noted long ago by Gemser, has more recently been investigated by, for instance, Westermann (1995) and Golka (1996). Parallels to African thought may also be found in Aristotle and Confucius. The African saying quoted by Magesa (1997:65), "Alone you are an animal", resembles Aristotle's saying that a man who has no need for society is "either a beast or a god" (*Politics* I:2). The common translations the Chinese term *jen*, a keystone of Confucian ethics, as 'human-heartedness', since the character combines of the characters for 'human' and 'two' (Fung 1962:10; Smith 1994:110), recalls *ubuntu* and the sayings connected to it.

26 On syncretism in later Chinese thought, see Fung (1962:81ff *passim*) and Ching (1993:221ff).

27 On the matter of worldview, I share the sceptical view of Sneed (2011:59f;68ff). Weeks (1994:90f) also reminds us that 'the wisdom tradition' as a circumscribed phenomenon is largely a speculative scholarly creation; our ignorance of much regarding it 'remains profound' (1994:156).

(Analects VI:20; IX:1; XII:3; XIV:2; cf. Ni 2009:316). More than once he limits himself to saying that certain views, actions or persons approach the ideal (*Analects* VI:25,28; VII:16; XIII:15,27; XIV:2). Aristotle too cannot perfectly define his key terms such as *to agathon* and *eudaimonia*[28] and leaves the determination of what virtuous action in specific instances would be to the *phronêsis* (itself not perfectly defined) of the wise and virtuous person. Moreover, all the sages sometimes let apparent contradictions stand alongside each other – in Aristotle particularly in the *Rhetoric*[29].

To a sense of limitations is thus added awareness that what we know does not cohere neatly. In modern science this awareness is seen in Delbrück's paradox: "the same matter as the matter of physics behaves in ways fully in accordance with the laws of physics but which cannot be accounted for by the laws of physics" (Schwartz 1992:129). At a certain point wisdom no longer consists in 'accounting for', but in re-cognizing the limits of accounting. Aristotle (*EN* II:2) insists that we do not need to understand fully what goodness is to live the good life.[30] Perhaps then the contradictions in wisdom literature (in the broad sense) arise not because different sages contradict one another, but because sages saw that our world sometimes contradicts itself.[31]

iii) Arguably this sense of inevitable contradiction prompted the sages to regard the world with a modicum of humour – what Burke (1955:iii,74) called 'comic ambivalence'. Aristotle, hardly a witty writer[32] though he regarded 'ready wit' as a virtue (*EN* IV:8), is our poorest guide in this respect. Others saw that where the world and people do not yield to our sense of 'good order', only a wry smile shields us from despair. On hearing of a pupil who constantly criticized others, Confucius said: "It is fortunate for Ssu that he is so perfect himself as to have time to spare for this. I myself have none" (*Analects* XIV:31). In this there is, beyond rebuke and a careful avoidance of duplicating the other's mistake, an attitude at once gentle and ironic. Similarly, the Israelite sages met the persistence of folly in the face of Lady Wisdom's impassioned pleas with a mixture of pathos and bathos, with a regretful smile. Two questions arise here. Can we fully understand the world, particularly what is paradoxical in it, without a sense of humour? Is humour itself a way of knowing, and if so, what are its ways? Then again, in what ways can and does humour constitute a virtue and particularly a social virtue? How does it enable us to come to terms with our own quirks and those of others (cf. Burke 1952:319)?

iv) Key concepts in any moral system are notoriously difficult to translate, partly because they are embedded in a culture and partly because they are contested even within that culture. Still, a comparative study of precisely such 'untranslatable' terms[33] could be valuable. Instead of seeking facile equations, one could ask how the various sages strove to find a rounded terminology of wisdom and virtue and what distinctions,

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[28]   Hardie (1980:20) rightly says that Aristotle's formal definition of *eudaimonia* accurately states the *problem*.

[29]   Yoder (2005) deals well with this aspect in Proverbs, noting that it instils humility.

[30]   He is scathing about those who think they will become good by theorizing about goodness (*EN* II:4).

[31]   On paradoxes in the world and paradoxes caused by our inconsistent desires, see Burke 1952:56,374. Michael Billig's study of everyday arguments confirms his view that the commonplaces current in a society are often contradictory (1991:21).

[32]   At best he manages quips, for instance when he defines wit as 'well-bred insolence' (*Rhetoric* II:12).

[33]   Terms such as *jen, té, li, jang, shu, chih, chün-tzu, hsiao*, חסד, מוסר, תם, צדיק, חיל, שלם, תושיה, ישר, *aretê, eudaimonia, enkrateia, phronêsis, to agathon, sophrosunê, diaiosunê* and *megalopsuchia* come to mind – obviously there are many others. Brown (1996:25ff) deals with some of the key Hebrew terms, Waley (1993:27ff) and Fung (1962:11ff) with some of the Chinese ones.

overlaps, family resemblance and differential orders among the various terminologies resulted from this search. Obviously each terminology categorizes and thus surveys the landscape of ethics and ethos in different ways, therefore neo-Saussurians may object that such a study promises nothing. This, I believe, is a deeply mistaken view. Aristotle (*EN* 2:7) already noted that some virtues and vices have no distinct names, yet he discussed them freely. Moreover, precisely the differences and the different contexts within which the terminologies functioned and were subtly adapted over time could indeed help us to see both gaps and complementarity. That, however, will happen only if we abandon the idle pretension that we wield an academic terminology outside and above the tussle between virtue and vice, wisdom and folly.

v) Among all the sages one will find, I believe, an awareness of the link *and* disjunction between virtue and wisdom. Wisdom is not quite virtue and folly not quite vice. Aristotle has particular difficulty regarding the relationship of practical wisdom, which is clearly needed to act virtuously, and theoretical, philosophical wisdom, which he regards as the highest faculty.[34] Among the Israelite sages a similar tension may be traced between mundane wisdom and the יהוה ירעת (cf. Ansberry 2010:161ff; Forti 2011). Confucius says that one may be a *chün-tzu* without possessing *jen*, but that the one who possesses *jen* is (by virtue of that?) a *chün-tzu* (*Analects* XIV:7; cf. IV:2). The fine distinction between ethos and ethics also comes into view here.

vi) This ties in with the consensus among the sages that virtue is located in and serves social life. Aristotle (*EN* I:2; cf. *Politics* I:2) maintains that ethics is a branch of politics (in his broad sense), though he later goes on to discuss individual virtues (particularly *megalopsuchia*) and vices in ways that could appear "individualistic". Much the same could be said of Confucius, who sometimes seems to be talking of "development of the self", but always within a framework that is resolutely social (cf. *Analects* IV:25; Ni 2009:316f) and, indeed, political in Aristotle's sense. Thus McKane's view (1970:415) that there is a disjunction between Israelite sayings concerning personal success and those that deal with social relations may be untenable. Whether or not a communalistic ethos in which the individual is submerged in the collective ever existed, the ethos and ethics of the sages maintain a balance between individuality and collectivity.

vii) Three related lines of enquiry can be hinted at briefly. The sages are at one in their emphasis on the value of education, while remaining aware that education may meet with limited success. Confucianism, 'a philosophy of education' according to Cho-Yee To (1993:79), possibly took this the furthest - in the view of some, to excess. The merits and demerit of the Chinese tradition of relentless drilling (cf. To 1993:81f) are once more up for discussion in educational theory. This is linked to another area of consensus among the sages: they all emphasize the value of self-discipline. This initial discipline, far from restricting personal growth, is what enables the sage ultimately to 'be well and do well' (*EN* 1:4, 8) with ease, grace and pleasure. As Confucius (*Analects* 2:4) says, at seventy he could do whatever he desired without going wrong.

Along with discipline goes the doctrine of the mean, patent in Aristotle and Confucius (*Analects* VI:27; XI:15) and hinted at in the Israelite material. Though it certainly does not indicate a desire for mediocrity and a set preference for middle-of-the-road choices, some detect in it a rejection of the exceptional and the adventurous. But is this so? Perhaps the sages, in coming to terms with what Robert Frost so aptly

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34   See *EN*:4: *passim* and the discussion of this section by Hardie (1980:212-29).

called 'the middleness of the road', sought to free themselves to explore the unknown from a relatively secure base in which avoidable crises would not permanently cripple them. The melodic line and basic themes enable rather than inhibit improvisation and variation.

Modern Times and New Goals

"The times they are a-changing", an old song with a title immune to aging, spoke of changes that have come and gone, though some survive in the memories of aging academics. Lest academia surrenders fully to the advertising rhetoric of novelty, I have spoken for old ideas. Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1993:27) give two reasons for not embracing novelties indiscriminately: First, "most variations in the evolutionary record are not advantageous and do not survive". We cannot assume that a "new organ of knowledge" will be better than previous ones; "in fact, the presumption is that it will be worse". Secondly, even if a new organ is in some respects "more sensitive or more powerful" than a previous one, it does not mean it can fully replace it: "Science may be a more evolved eye, but it does not compensate for being blind."[35] Though no scientifico-Trotskyite believers in 'permanent paradigm shift', they nevertheless see themselves as working for *change*, even progress. I too hope that by rescuing old ideas from incarceration in 'incommensurable paradigms' we may retrieve their *relative* value for today *and* see more clearly their limitations. We may then be in a better position to criticize what has remained entrenched in the unconscious of our cultural practices, the part seldom exposed to reflection, than those who criticize from an equally unexamined *parti pris*. When I 'criticize', 'speaking as an X', what I say often amounts to no more than 'that's like so not me'.

The ways of the sages are not beyond criticism. Generally they envisage roads that all *men* must travel; women,[36] if they are mentioned at all, trail behind the men. When women receive 'honourable mention', they are confirmed in the position of subalterns (cf. Blenkinsopp 1995:48; Crenshaw 1998:14) and feminists rightly refuse to rejoice. All the traditions are confidently hierarchical: Aristotle's justification of slavery (*Politics* I:3-7) leaps to mind. In this respect as well what purports to be the human journey *sans phrase* seems to exclude some humans. I leave it at these two blatant examples.

If we envisage a new, less sexist and more egalitarian, journey today we need to speak critically from a position that neither assumes manifest superiority nor creates new principles of exclusion. We need to treat the ancient voices and those of our current interlocutors in accordance with our stated principles. Doubtless we have much to learn and so do others; doubtless we must be open to change and so must others. This would rule out the criticism – unworthy of the name – that amounts to flat dismissal and pious or condescending withholding of criticism – supposedly in respect for the 'otherness of the other'. If we can, as a matter of wisdom and moral formation, learn to respect ancient speakers enough to direct collegial criticism at them *and* receive collegial criticism from them, it is just possible that we may come to treat one another in the same way.

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[35] Thus "neither science nor philosophy is able to replace wisdom" (Westermann 1995:136).

[36] Aristotle (*Politics* I:12) regards women, unlike children, as permanently unequal to men (though not, like slaves, different by nature) and Confucius (*Analects* XVII:25) ranks them with those of low birth, both groups being 'hard to deal with' because they are either insolent or resentful. The sexism in Proverbs is slightly less blatant.

A respectfully critical survey of old roads[37] will show where those before us had seen the need to change course. Reading the sages, we find that shifts regarding human excellence had already taken place. *Aretê*, having lost its link with Ares, the god of war, no longer signified only soldierly qualities. The איש חיל in the Old Testament, no longer invariably an able warrior, now has a female counterpart who is not a warrior at all. In the Confucian vocabulary *té,* which can mean 'power' or 'force', is contrasted to physical force; Waley (1938:33) speaks of 'moral force'. As Nussbaum (1993:249) points out, Aristotle's account of courage already goes beyond physical courage (cf. *EN* III:8). Sometimes one tradition went further than the others. Aristotle's views of friendship (*EN*:VIII) and citizenship (*Politics* III:1-5) show his awareness that his 'modern' society could no longer base itself on the model of the extended family. Confucius, who still assigned a central role to the family,[38] was more than an opponent of war and strife; he called for a deliberate cultivation of the 'arts of peace' (Smith 1994:111f). The Israelite sages, in some respects more egalitarian than the others, emphasized diligence and apparently rejected the snobbery about manual labour, crafts and trade that is particularly clear in Aristotle.

Old ideas must be taken seriously; so must modern times. Our path through life cannot be the same as that of the old sages; it cannot avoid being similar. Some popular singers seem to have remembered that better than some academics. That, ultimately, is why I like Dylan and Cohen's songs better than many academic texts. Yeah, they're both old and I am aging, but at least, recalling my youthful infatuation with academic paraphernalia, I can say, with Dylan, "I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now." I need sages to see my way through tomorrow; most scholars show me only yesterday. Would that there were more exceptions.

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[37] Here Aristotle can serve as an example to us. If 'received opinions' (*endoxa*) derive from either the majority of people or the wisest among them, they are unlikely to be sheer error (*EN* I:8), yet he does not hesitate to differ even from his mentor Plato (*EN* 1:6).

[38] Cf. Ching 1993:58; Smith 1994:120. So too Israelite wisdom; cf. Golka 1996:83ff; Clifford 2009:248ff.

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