A Social Interpretation of Personal Wisdom

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How different are the varieties of thinking about wisdom, and personal wisdom, that we encounter in everyday life? An ethnographic perspective on wisdom takes very seriously the daily remarks and behaviour that are part and parcel of living in different cultural environments. It aims to reconstruct ways in which wisdom and wise people are thought of in different social settings, searching within socially embedded discourses and ways of behaving in order to reconstruct the understandings they express. It sets the views and conduct of ordinary people at centre stage, prepared to learn from what they say and do in an effort to understand more about wisdom as a topic. Here, I explore interpretations of wise people that are current in the West of Ireland, where envisaging not only what wisdom involves but also what 'a person' is has a striking view of the world to convey: it tends to accentuate interpersonal transactions and encounters, in contrast to intrapersonal ones. This offers a processual account of wisdom that can be pieced together as a result of observing and interacting with the people in whose world it is important.

The resulting construal of wisdom may have parallels in other settings that also highlight the significance of behavioural practice in conveying meaning (for instance, Jewish and other religious discourses or some approaches to psychotherapy), though they may or may not be dominant interpretations in those settings and may run alongside other accounts of what wisdom is. In this more interpersonal, process-oriented discourse, distinctions between being counted as wise generally and being personally wise may narrow and take special form. This approach to wisdom thus complements accounts of personal wisdom in other cultures and other disciplines, which highlight capacities on the parts of wise people such as

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'knowledge about the self and one's own life' and 'strategies of self-management' (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008, p. 788) or self-actualisation or self-transcendence (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991; Beaumont, 2009).

In this chapter, then, I first point out that the history of discussing wisdom offers us a number of strikingly various portrayals of what wise people are like. This should discourage us from assuming that there is one single capacity, wisdom, which appears in a relatively invariant manner in all settings. Instead, wisdom may be a 'range' concept: there may be a family of types of wisdom which may share many interconnections but do not take the same form everywhere. I argue too that finding out more about at least some of these types of wisdom demands a combination of ethnographic and philosophical methods that can illuminate aspects of wisdom which are not easy to access simply by asking people about them. In particular, I focus on a form of wisdom that can be observed in the West of Ireland, one in which 'personal' wisdom is less distinct from general wisdom than may be the case elsewhere and in which actualising wisdom is a fundamentally social process. I suggest too that while this may be in some ways a culturally distinct form of wisdom, it can cast light on related forms elsewhere.

Portrayals of Wise People

An extraordinary range of images of wise people can be found in the history of debate about wisdom, even if we confine ourselves to traditions influenced by Judaeo-Christian or Graeco-Roman traditions in Western thought. These images seem to convey very disparate messages about the people concerned, oscillating between expectations about engagement in politics or society as a condition of the possibility of being termed personally wise, personal wisdom defined in terms of behaviour among friends, or personal wisdom in terms of the individual's innermost life. The figure of Solomon, said to have ruled the Hebrews in the tenth century B.C., offers an early, and still key, paradigm of wisdom; but the story recorded in I Kings 4 in around the sixth century B.C. (Clarke, 1973; Crenshaw, 2010) tells us little about what Solomon intended in his famous judgement. Instead it concentrates on what he *did*. Appallingly, he decreed that an infant claimed by each of two women as their own should be cut in half. In the event, this 'decision' was not what it seemed: it provoked the discovery of the infant's true mother.[1] In contrast, the Graeco-Roman, humanist tradition of wisdom associated with Isocrates (436–338 B.C.) and Cicero (106–43 B.C.) does in part involve the question of what sort of characteristics a wise person should have – knowledge of human and divine affairs, for instance – as well as what such a person should do: act as an optimal citizen in the state. On this account, a wise person is marked by outstandingly beneficial contributions to public contexts where decisions need to be made. Such effective contributions to the political community depend on wide-ranging knowledge and experience but also

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[1] For a reconstruction of the inductive and enthymematic logic of argument implied here.

on a passionate commitment to the common good, on emotions schooled to virtue and on the eloquence needed for convincing others (Cicero, *On Duties*, I, 6 19; Isocrates, Panegyricus 48f; cf. Poulakos & Depew, 2004, pp. 58–59). One might be generally wise through being insightful and well informed, but, in this tradition, personally wise people acted as such in public. The public arena was the place in which one was a person.

The wisdom of Socrates (469–399 B.C.), a contemporary of Isocrates, involved a continuing critical self-interrogation, in concert with other members of the political community, aiming at 'care for the soul' but not aspiring to the title 'wise'. This contrasts with what other schools of thought saw as a 'sage'. The Epicureans, in the same period, envisaged an apolitical individual, able to throw off the negative and irrational habits of thought, emotion and action which make human beings unhappy, attaining almost godlike felicity – among a small circle of friends rather than society at large. But Desert Fathers such as Anthony the Great (c.251–356 A.D.) astonished others by the awe-inspiring vulnerability of their radical *retreat* from society as a precondition for personal wisdom. At once audacious and humble, they appeared 'aloof and forbidding', yet with 'an extraordinary depth of compassion' (Burton-Christie, 1993, p. 3). A contemporary, Jungian version comes closer to the expectation that intrapsychic (rather than interpersonal or social) processes are central to personal wisdom. It depicts wisdom as embodied by 'a person who has come to know what is true for him or her, one who has been refined by the fires of suffering and achieved a modicum of peace', who knows 'one thing' well but is 'open still to growth, correction and change, and respectful of mystery' (Hollis, 2001, p. 88).

In response to this great range and variety of thought, emotion, character and action, we might try to discern different categories into which images of wise people fall. Even traits recurrently attributed to them, such as knowledge of human affairs or tolerance, do not appear in all contexts or take on different meanings from one to another. Nor are all the components variously attributed to such figures compatible; some see religious belief, for example, as essential for personal wisdom, while others view it as undermining it. Hence, it seems almost impossible to construct a single image of 'the' personally wise individual. Instead, different traditions offer a range of images which imply different conceptions of what wisdom involves, whether directed towards others or towards oneself.

Bearing these reservations in mind, perceptions of wisdom and wise people might be mapped along a variety of axes. For the purposes of this chapter, and bearing in mind the range of possibilities just discussed, I shall highlight spectra between intrapersonal – inward-turning or psychocentric – accounts of wisdom at one end and interpersonal, outward-looking or community-directed versions at the other[2]; and between wisdom as an overall perfection (whether or not attainable by human beings) and wisdom as achievable in some aspects of a person's behaviour,

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[2] Extra-personal, environment-oriented versions of wisdom are subsumed in the category 'interpersonal' for these purposes, though they are in need of separate attention.

or useful as a guide, for fallible beings who might neither term themselves wise nor be termed so in all respects by others. I derive these categories from perennial contrasts in the history of debate: first, between wisdom regarded as pertaining to individuals (where individuals may be envisaged as relatively self-contained), and wisdom seen as located in processes of communication and joint action; secondly, between wisdom as perfect – perhaps effectively unattainable – in senses associated with Plato or Kant, versus wisdom in the tradition of Isocrates and Cicero, who were interested in practices within the reach of real people, even if not attainable in the same degree by everyone. It will be the second in each pair which relates most closely to the West of Ireland.

Versions of wisdom located at different positions on the resulting chart offer different answers to questions such as how wisdom can be encouraged and supported or whether general and personal wisdom differ. They also entail different sets of expectations of what a wise person would be like, as well as how likely it is that we should ever encounter such an individual. Very stringent standards for wisdom entail that wise people are so rare that attempting to study them would be exceptionally challenging (Ardelt, 2004). But in any case, the examples to be examined here belong in that quadrant of the chart (II) in which wisdom is envisaged as a relatively outward-facing phenomenon, in principle at least partly within the reach of relatively imperfect people.

Remaining within this top right-hand quadrant, this chapter argues for paying ethnographic attention to accounts of wisdom and wise people offered in cultures, times and places in which wisdom is envisaged as playing some part in everyday life. It begins to traverse the rough ground of practices associated with wisdom, retracing what wise people are said to do, or wise processes they produce. Attending to the practice of everyday life allows us to take account of the fact that much that is vital to people's worlds of meaning is, for a range of reasons, not willingly or easily put into words, particularly not into clearly inter-translatable single words.[3] From an ethnographic viewpoint, understanding what people mean is partly dependent on seeing what they do; it does not expect people always to be able, or to wish, to give meticulous accounts of the precise imports of their daily activities. Many forms of behaviour (for instance, reassuring, flirting, speaking sincerely) would not only be undermined but actually transformed into other, more manipulative types of action if undertaken with conscious meta-reflection. Moreover, the complexes of attitudes and behaviour often referred to as 'practices' bring with them cascades of conduct whose components need not all be deliberately chosen (Warde, 2005). A teacher, say, may adopt habits of speech or dress that indicate attitudes to the vocation of teaching but that seem to follow 'naturally' from that role so that their very existence may be unknown to the person concerned. Thus, accounts of wisdom carried by

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[3] Even attempts to discuss wisdom explicitly may be multivalent and long drawn-out. Hollis (2001), for example, offers an account which may seem more familiar to contemporary readers than Solomonic or Ciceronian versions; nonetheless, he takes an entire book, founded on a lifetime of therapeutic practice and reflection, to begin to explicate his approach to wisdom.

particular traditions may be partly implicit, scattered among disparate pieces of behaviour that need to be connected: from neighbourly gestures to responses to strangers, everyday actions may imply or express criteria for wise behaviour. Accounts may also be partly explicit, to the extent that people are prepared to discuss them, though the terms in which they do so may still require translation.

In this chapter, I shall examine a succession of particular views of wise people, reconstructing conduct and remarks from the West of Ireland within their social context. This is a context with its own account not only of what wisdom is but also of *what being a person is*, and this too offers suggestions about how to scrutinise wise people and processes. I shall infer from contextual usages and also from ethnographic interviews with people who themselves have been identified as wise or insightful by at least some others – heightening the richness we can expect in what they say.[4]

If we begin in this uneven territory, attempting to explicate partly obscured indications of what people in specified social contexts treat as wisdom, it is a separate, and more clearly evaluative, undertaking to assert that these accounts possess validity in themselves. Asking people what they believe wisdom is, or observing what their behaviour implies about it, produces important evidence that should be taken seriously, but it is (partial) evidence about what wisdom may be considered to be in a given personal, political or cultural setting. It does not offer a form of direct access to what it 'actually' is.[5] I shall focus here on explicating commonalities between versions of 'wisdom' in the discourses at issue. It will be possible to highlight elements of these versions that appear compatible with other theories in other times and places, but I shall take a tentative approach to the ultimate status of the theories involved.

Wise People and Everyday Life in the West of Ireland

Ethnography, as a diverse tradition of professional practice and analysis drawn upon by sociologists and anthropologists (Arensberg, 1937; Rock, 2001), revolves around evidence derived primarily from face-to-face fieldwork, though it usually draws on other data – material or documentary – as well. As Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, and Lofland (2001) point out, whatever else ethnography is

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[4] Ethnographic interviews take place within contexts which the interviewer is in the course of studying in depth, diachronically as well as synchronically, taking into account practices, habits, conventions which can shed light on meanings not expressed directly, where the interviewer is conscious that language is a social phenomenon and responds to what the other person says with this in mind.

[5] It would be possible, and in some ways instructive, to produce an ethnography of a group whose view of wisdom could be argued to be sentimental or even destructive, but this approach will not be pursued here. This is not intended to be a relativist account of wisdom: however. I support the account of sociological realism and social construction offered by Sayer (1999).

taken to entail, it essentially begins from close, in some sense, participatory evidence about what other people say and do. As far as wisdom is concerned, the purpose of this activity cannot be solely to collect surface accounts of novel customs, habits and social structures, important as these are, but crucially to excavate to deeper levels of meaning, borne out in the language and behaviour of people who see the world differently from oneself. This entails navigating levels of meaning production *beneath* those on which language is used intentionally as a daily tool.[6] Based on my own participant observation in the West of Ireland from the early 1990s onwards, in an area some 20 km west of the city of Galway, this section of the chapter will outline specificities of local interaction as they concern personhood in general, before approaching the way in which wise people may be envisaged in the larger West of Ireland.

My own immediate neighbours speak Irish (*Gaeilge*, sometimes termed Irish Gaelic), usually because they were raised speaking it and wish to continue doing so, but this was an area well known for its mastery of the language many decades ago, and people still come to live here either to study Irish or to participate in continuing to speak it. A poet from this road or 'village', Máirtín Ó Cadhain, wrote the scurrilous *Cré na Cille*, a play dealing with vituperations among the dead in a local graveyard, and a powerful attempt to render the specificity of this culture. Until 50 years ago, it was based on a 'semi-traditional' economy in which women spun wool from their sheep in the winter to make thread they would carry in hazel-rod baskets to the local weaver, then sew clothes for their families; money was used mainly for items such as shoes, tea or sugar. Subsistence farming did not make for an easy life; a neighbour said once, 'The happiest day of my life was when I threw away my spindle!' Many habits of mind and behaviour from this period persist, though this road is now also in some ways multicultural, with inhabitants from countries including the Netherlands, India, Germany, the USA and the UK as well as from non-Irish-speaking parts of Ireland.

At least in some respects, life in the West of Ireland as a whole offers an account of what it is to be a person that draws attention to *inter*personal, public phenomena. Being a wise person is expressed through, and based on expectations about, habits and practices relating to what being a person is. This requires us to set aside conventional expectations of 'internal' or 'subjective' as opposed to 'intersubjective' behaviour since such distinctions are blurred here. But it may direct us to ways of scrutinising aspects of what persons do which can be usefully employed in understanding *wise* persons.

The observations made here stem initially from participation in everyday settings, ranging from greeting people in the local shop to attending funerals. My analysis of such events is supported by students' and colleagues' work concerning

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[6] This develops analytical methods in the tradition of Alfred Schütz (1962), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Geertz (1973), Turner (1974), as well as J. L. Austin (1962) and Winch (1958), reconstructing what people mean from the gamut of what they say and do. See also Fuller (1988) and Moses and Knutsen (2007).

wisdom or intercultural (mis-)understandings, and by ethnographic interviews, as well as visual and documentary data. This material is analysed using, in part, techniques imported from linguistic philosophy, with the aim of reconstructing the informal reasoning underlying everyday communication or interaction. Usages that may seem puzzling to the newcomer – 'xenisms', from the incomer's viewpoint – tend to offer themselves for interpretation first. In the West of Ireland these include practices in connection with problems or conflicts with implications for local conceptions of personhood. It may seem hard to understand, for example, why potential conflicts are frequently not dealt with in direct speech (a fact that has often been misinterpreted by foreigners as evasiveness). But it is possible to reconstruct patterns of behaviour, speech and silence to suggest that in effect neighbours take a longer-term view of personal intentions than can be expressed in direct encounters. In one case in County Galway known to me, a publican who owned a flock of sheep purloined some animals from a neighbouring farmer. The farmer did not raise the issue in so many words, instead successfully requesting a non-returnable 'loan' in the malefactor's pub to the value of the sheep in question. Justice, this implies, is expressed in action more effectively than words, and it was important to achieve it in a way which did not jeopardise future relations between the two people concerned. To argue overtly about the matter would have introduced extraneous resentments into the case; the individuals in question would have had the fleeting satisfaction of expressing their feelings, but their capacities for future interaction might have been permanently injured.

A superficially different case throws further light on this implication. When learning Irish, I once asked how to say, 'I'm impressed!' to a child, in admiration of her musical skill – to be told that it is impossible to make such a remark: 'Irish isn't a romantic language'. In other words, subjectivity plays a less public role here. Perhaps understandably, this type of meta-interpretation cannot readily be elicited from most ordinary inhabitants of any culture. It depends on combining ethnographic methods of participant observation, schooling oneself to behave and react as inhabitants do, with philosophical enquiries into meaning. Learning 'how to go on' in a cultural setting takes it that inhabitants' concepts – of wisdom or anything else – are not 'in their heads' but to be discovered in their interaction (Wittgenstein, 1953/2001). Ethnographic methods restore their social aspects to ideas, which are often implicit in shared behavioural assumptions about appropriate action in particular circumstances; philosophical methods allow us to infer to patterns underlying these assumptions and to test out these inferences in our own conduct and future observations.

Thus, when new to this district, I possessed dogs which habitually trespassed onto my neighbour's land. Speaking to a second person who lived in the village, I expressed my intention to visit my neighbour to apologise and to undertake to keep the animals under better control. To my surprise, this plan was greeted with obvious, but unformulated, disapproval. If we compare this case with the question of complimenting the musical child, it appears that in each, what is avoided is the explicit exposition of one's own internal state as an unavowed means to causing another person to think, expect or feel something one designs them to think, expect

or feel. This would count here, it would seem, as manipulation: not manipulation in the cause of justice, as in the case of the farmer, but manipulation with the underhand purpose of trying to get others to think better of me than I deserved. This interpretation is based on an abductive inference (Peirce, 1903/1931–1958). If the account I have given of the status attributed to mental states in the West of Ireland is correct, my interlocutor's disapproval would follow as a matter of course. Under those circumstances, the only appropriate response on my part would have been actually to control the dogs (which I did). There was nothing that could immediately be done to extricate myself from embarrassment: I needed to accept that this was a longer-term problem than I would have preferred.

There is a dual point to be made here. First, since meaning is partially social, not exclusively dependent on individuals' views, it often needs to be elicited over time. Secondly, the culture of the West of Ireland is one in which the expression of subjective states of mind is simply less systematically lauded than it is in 'post-modern' cultures. The immediate expression of subjectivity is not automatically valued in itself, which is 'unromantic' in a strictly technical sense. Thus, for example, conversation with neighbours on the road is an interactive process; displaying the speaker's personal opinions counts as less important than offering remarks to which an interlocutor can respond. By and large, communication in the West of Ireland does not prioritise verbalising subjective states directly – which does not, of course, mean that concern for other people or criticism of their doings cannot be expressed effectively in other ways.

Phenomena like these contribute to a culture in which individual subjectivity is somewhat downplayed in comparison with conventions in more highly urbanised contemporary cultures – in which, possibly, it may be overplayed. Consonantly with this, everyday speech not only in the West but elsewhere in Ireland tends to be reluctant to isolate personal capacities. On the whole, it describes what people *do* rather than (perhaps presumptuously) identifying capacities that might be thought to underlie their activity. Thus, it is considered preferable to make the relatively reticent claim, 'They get on great together', rather than attempting what might be considered an overhasty diagnosis of a relationship: 'They are friends', 'They are in love', 'They co-operate effectively when serving together in a shop' or whatever the case may be. These locutions are situated within a communicative system which takes for granted that people know each other or can extrapolate from what is done by similar people in similar settings. Hearers are expected to make sense of what is said through schooled capacities to judge the context in question. This approach is also in a sense empirical, taking note of what speakers can see or have experienced than what they may speculate to be 'behind' others' behaviour in a psychological sense. To this extent, it is also relatively non-judgemental. (In Hibernian English – the type of English used in Ireland, which is influenced by Irish usages – this is 'slow' to judge: from the Irish 'mall', covering both slow in speed and reluctance. This is itself an instance of the behaviourist approach to personal description described here.) On the whole, this form of communication avoids the more
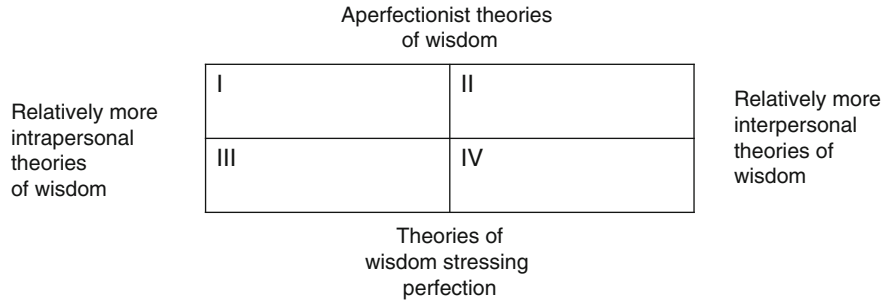
Aperfectionist theories
of wisdom

Relatively more
intrapersonal
theories
of wisdom

Relatively more
interpersonal
theories of
wisdom

Theories of
wisdom stressing
perfection

Fig. 1 Locating theories of wisdom

reifying aspects of language relating to skills and capacities.[7] In this sense, personal conduct is interpreted as 'social', not in the political sense used by Cicero, but in the location of personal behaviour in its impact among others. A neighbour then in her 80s said, 'Why shouldn't I go to heaven? I've never quarrelled with my neighbours'. Her spiritual state, so to speak, was located in her relations with other people[8] rather than in primarily subjective or propositional attitudes.

It seems consonant with this interpretation that accounts of wise people offered in the West of Ireland tend to refer first and foremost to what people could do and did for others, rather than to more 'internal' characteristics. The cases traced in this chapter, consequently, fit into the top right-hand quadrant of Fig. 1 above: they do not focus on ideas about wisdom that presuppose (near-)perfection on the part of the person concerned, and they highlight interpersonal rather than internal or subjective capacities. In the case of Sean Murphy, a farmer from North Connemara, long after his death people recalled the ways he solved problems by bringing other people to take fresh approaches to them.[9] It is true that he had an attractive personality: his

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[7] When asked on a radio show if she could change a plug, a caller said, 'I'd give it a go' (RTE 1, Joe Duffy Show, 8.10.2010). She expressed willingness to attempt an activity, rather than laying claim to the possession of a skill. A listener to this interchange wishing to have a plug rewired could infer that it was safe to entrust the task to this caller; but the caller insisted on referring to what she *might do*, rather than a capacity she *possessed*. On the contrary, her response, tactfully but firmly, avoided laying claim to any such thing. Simultaneously, she converted a technical question to a social one. Being able to convey a degree of tentativeness, modesty or humour is part of the sociality involved in such conversations. Significantly, it underlines the importance of attending to what happens between people, over and above features attaching only to individuals.

[8] The location of at least some personal characteristics in public, interpersonal behaviour suggests parallels with the contemporary translation of *Luke* 17:21 by some interpreters to read 'the kingdom of heaven is among you' rather than 'within you'. Similarly, the term 'persona' in Latin and Greek refers to public aspects of the person. This underlines the fact that the details and implications of distinctions between private and public, or subjective and intersubjective, in different cultural settings cannot be taken for granted.

[9] These details are taken, with thanks, from the account collected by Elaine McCaffrey in 2003. The protagonist's name has been changed here at the request of relatives. See also Edmondson (2005).

behaviour to others was both 'jolly' and 'straight down the line'. Like others identified as wise in this context, he was a narrator of stories; he would call often at others' houses for conversation. 'People wanted to listen to him'. He dealt with conflicts from the points of view of all participants, still keeping sight of what was right and getting a 'dig' in to that effect. In a case involving a neighbour who was angry with his son, Sean merely asked him what he had done to cause his son to lie to him. It took the neighbour a long while to realise that his own strictness had partly caused his son's conduct. Sean's wisdom seems to have consisted in supplying the spur for the neighbour to progress in eventually changing his behaviour (cf. Edmondson, 2005).

In this interpretive setting, to behave in a certain way does not show that one possesses (internal) capacities for wisdom, it *constitutes* being wise. Similarly, Tim O'Flaherty in South Connemara was described as wise because of what he could spur others to do. His use of proverbs was both diagnostic and effective: 'The proverb would lay things out for you in a way that made you think about them, think what you would do in the future' (cf. Edmondson, 2009). In an ethnographic interview, his son-in-law described how wise people communicate.[10]

> People don't like to be told what to do. And that's not advice really, that's more a command or an order. It's too direct and it's a bit intimidating.
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> What they would usually describe is somebody else up the road that had a similar problem. The idea really is to have the person themselves arrive at the solution, or at least to have new thought on the solution, so that the conversation revolves around the person with the problem explaining the problem and being teased about it and going through it. You don't suggest the answer really but the question brings out an answer or brings out an option that the person wouldn't see on their own.

Wisdom in this account resides not in the superiority of wise individuals but in what happens between them and others, as well as in what they bring others to do.

Recognising Wise People

The instances of wise people discussed here point to what they do: and what they do seems centrally to enable *others* to act. Their own contributions to wisdom form parts of interpersonal *processes* that must be completed by others, who for their parts may or may not revise their predicaments appropriately. 'Then they would choose what was best, or they wouldn't always choose the right option but they would at least have had an opportunity' (interview, 20.11.2010). Personal wisdom, in this interpretation, might refer less to wisdom in dealings with oneself than to the ability to bring vividly to light capacities for change in another person: to the personal nature of one's investment in others.[11]

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[10] Interview with Charlie Lennon (20 November 2010).

[11] In a different discourse, Petrarch seems to have seen Cicero as *personally* uniting eloquence and virtue, in comparison with Aristotle, better at expounding virtue than at urging its cultivation: Cicero could make people want to act well (Grant, 1960, p. 27).

This may seem disappointing in comparison with expectations of wise person-hood like those voiced by one contributor to a recent Internet discussion: 'the outward expression of inner being, of a state of mature, conscious inner being'.[12] From a different point of view, the philosopher John Kekes connects wisdom with 'good judgment' brought by someone 'to bear on his actions' – his *own* actions, which are not conspicuously engaged with in these Irish examples (1983, p. 277). 'Self-wisdom' seems relatively low key in this particular version. In the ethnographic interview referred to above, the speaker was asked to comment on this concept. He says,

> It's a strange thing, but sometimes you start with a problem, I may have some problem in my head, and I'd leave it a day or two. And then I'd have a word with Síle [his wife], and she'd say, maybe, 'Well why don't you do this?' or 'Did you think of that?' – instantly, like, and I'd say, 'Well no, I never thought of that actually, it's very simple but it never occurred to me'. In many ways . . . you're tempted to ignore very obvious solutions that are close by.

This speaker explicitly resists the view that personal wisdom is a matter of competence in conducting one's own affairs. Wise people themselves 'have their own problems, and they just try and deal with them' like others. In this particular discourse, self-wisdom seems to appear when wise individuals reverse the roles allotted to them: they themselves become listeners to others, responding to 'digs' from those around them.

Kekes remarks that 'Wisdom ought also to show in the man who has it' (1983, p. 281). But this does not mean there has always been agreement on who is a wise person. Showing wisdom, in discursive settings stressing interpersonal behaviour, may depend on complex stages of interaction. What wise people described in the West of Ireland are 'like' as people may possibly be connected to their wisdom, but not necessarily in such a way as to make them immediately identifiable as wise. Sean Murphy was well known for his warmth, his hospitality and his facility for recitations; these underline his membership of public life in the context of Irish celebrations, to which participants were traditionally expected to contribute actively. But someone encountering him on his way home from the pub after a convivial evening might not have identified him immediately as a wise man.

In the case of Tim O'Flaherty, not everyone asked to recall him describes him as a wise person. This is not intended to suggest that traits of personality or character are not associated with this perception of wisdom. It does suggest that immediate recognition as wise, or *seeming* wise, may not be central to this model of wise personhood. It may be that recognising the wisdom of wise people is in part at least an achievement of witnesses, one which may itself require time to develop and apply and which may also require a degree of discernment on their own parts.

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[12] No reference is given here in order to protect the anonymity of the writer.

Wise Interpersonal Processes in Contrasting Cultural Settings

So far, I have highlighted talk about wisdom located in a particular discourse within the particular social environment of the West of Ireland. Even if, in the contemporary world, this is by no means the only discourse current in relation to wisdom, related discursive practices may still be found in other social contexts.[13] The culture of the West of Ireland is not a complete outlier. There is space here only to point briefly to other locations where ways of behaving are at least sometimes stressed over and above statements and opinions. This allows us to trace other, possibly related approaches to the questions of who is expected to be a wise person and what wise people are expected characteristically to do. This may allow the development of this account of how 'a-perfectionist' forms of wisdom are thought to work, as well as highlighting some puzzles and surprises connected with the ways in which wise persons can be seen.

Problems in attributing wisdom to others and recognising wise people have been addressed in a number of cultural settings for a very long time. The 'Seven Sages' in Greece in the seventh to sixth centuries BC were revered for their capacities to contribute to social and political as well as natural-scientific questions; it is notable that there is no wholly agreed list of who these seven were. But Diogenes Laertius (flourished third century B.C.), in his *Lives and Doctrines of the Philosophers* (VII, 8; cf. I, 41/*Thales* I 27f)*,* relates the story of a three-footed trophy or 'tripod' found in the sea by fishermen. The Oracle at Delphi instructed them to offer it to someone renowned for wisdom, and they first approached Thales himself. He refused it, sending it to another of the Sages, who, in turn, also passed it on. Versions of this tale differ, but all stress the part about passing on the acknowledgement of wisdom to another person rather than attributing wisdom to oneself. In one of the versions recounted by Diogenes Laetius, the last Sage to receive the tripod simply declared that no one was wiser than Apollo and instructed the trophy to be carried to Delphi.

This story can be interpreted in a number of ways. If it conveys that no human being can be regarded as wise in the sense that gods are wise, it remains ambiguous whether the tale is supporting a 'perfectionist' account of wisdom, in effect confining wisdom to the gods, or simply suggesting that, among imperfect human beings, it is pointless to try to decide who is wisest. It might merely be held to link wisdom with modesty. But it might be read to indicate that wisdom, at any rate among humans, is not something which can properly be attributed to a single individual, or not in its entirety. Here too, the suggestion may be that human wisdom takes place in the interpersonal space *between* a number of people rather than in what one or other of them does.

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[13] Most cultural environments today have become hospitable to a variety of public discourses and cannot be characterised in terms of unitary communicative forms. In the West of Ireland, for example, it may be possible to elicit accounts of wisdom associated with relatively recent religious interpretations of the world such as those associated with the work of the late John O'Donohue (1999).

Personal Wisdom in Interpersonal Space

Searching for more insight into processual discourses about wisdom, we shall move on to a cultural setting in which questions about wisdom have been perennially raised and one in which both practice and the *idea* of practice are to the fore: Judaism (Klingenstein, 1996). For reasons of space, I cannot explore this setting in detail but shall concentrate on excerpts from an ethnographic interview with a London rabbi, Rabbi Lionel Blue, treating him in some respects as a paradigmatic case. On the one hand, this speaker is prepared to locate wisdom in what goes on among people. On the other, he certainly adverts to the need for people to 'understand themselves' and 'evaluate their own experience'. However, it is unclear if he thinks this a component of personal wisdom as such rather than a sensible necessity for getting through life on anyone's part.

Although Rabbi Blue is widely regarded as personally wise, he does not present himself as possessing orderly achievements in this regard, such that onlookers could at once identify him as a wise person. On the contrary, his autobiography (2005), rehearsing labyrinthine predicaments on its author's part in remorseless detail, pointedly undermines any such simplistic attributions. We may make sense of this if the personal wisdom attributed to him resides in the ways he responds to and deals with others, supporting or developing their capacities to feel at home with life – at the same time as offering responses that may take them aback in relation to particular issues.

Holliday and Chandler (1986) comment on 'the paradoxical, and often ironic, essence of wisdom' (p. 12). If both people and practices are important to understanding wisdom in the Judaic tradition, this does not mean that it is possible simply to read off from either of them what to do, as some of Rabbi Blue's references to practices in the following interview underline. The recipient of his examples must make an active effort to interpret them, which underscores the interactive nature of what they are intended to convey.

> There was the question about whether people should stand up for the Shema. One group insisted upon sitting for it, meditating quietly upon it, and one group insisted on standing up and speaking it clearly out loud. The argument got so violent that they started throwing prayer books at each other! They had to find out which was right. So they went to see an old boy who was almost gaga and stuck away in a home somewhere. The first side explained their position. 'Well, it could be', he said, 'but somehow I think it wasn't quite like that in our day'. The side who wanted to declaim out loud explained their point of view. 'No', said the old boy. 'I don't think it was quite like that'. They said, 'We have to know what the original tradition is, it's urgent, because they're throwing books at each other!' 'Yes!' he said. 'That was our tradition!'

Perhaps this story is intended to discourage us from reifying practice, significant as it is, or insight itself and to underline the fact that discerning what best to do is a continuing struggle. Even within a tradition in which practice is central, it is not always settled either what the practices should all be or how they should be interpreted: 'The Talmud is one argument going on and on and on – with not many decisions!' This is not necessarily a cause for despair. 'The argument itself is

holy'; argument 'refines us' rather than providing us with definite conclusions. Long legal wrangles are most productive for offering 'throwaway remarks' which can help to move us on (all quotations in this paragraph come from one interview, on July 9, 2010). In the end, Rabbi Blue says about wisdom, 'It takes all sorts of people together, that's my aperçu on the whole thing!'

To pursue what is done by 'all sorts of people together', it would be important to explore further ethnographic fields in which it is emphasised that insights stem from interaction, for example, aspects of systems or narrative therapy (Edmondson, 2012; Edmondson, Pearce, & Woerner, 2009). Therapists do amass knowledge and understanding about how other people are likely to behave and how most effectively to respond to them (cf. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Wink & Helson, 1997). Yet this expertise, which mounts up from learning what sorts or reactions people might have or how they might respond to certain suggestions, is distinct from wisdom itself, which we may think of as developing in the course of therapeutic conversation (cf. Ferrari, 2003). This is not to claim that implicit concepts of wisdom are identical in the West of Ireland, the history of Judaism and psychotherapy. It merely points to the existence of an important *family* of concepts of wisdom, all of which stress wisdom as part of an interpersonal process among imperfect human beings.

In this chapter, I have examined a number of cultural settings in which wisdom can at least sometimes be regarded as involving a process or transaction. Personal wisdom, here, may most saliently involve the immediacy or integrity of relations to others or the vividness with which the process is brought to life. This is not to deny the significance of other discourses dealing with wisdom, which are notoriously carried out in different ways (Karelitz, Jarvin, & Sternberg, 2010). But it does suggest some further questions.

The Role of Wise People in Wise Processes

The interviews and observations discussed here have highlighted aspects of some 'a-perfectionist' conceptions of wisdom that envisage wisdom as not in the first place 'internal' and see it as encountered in the real world. These features were derived from observations and conversations in their contexts of meaning[14]; commonalities between them should be regarded with caution but are striking nevertheless.

In different ways, these positions portray wise people as active and interactive, their most marked achievements being contributions to *processes* that *enable* others – to act differently, to alter perspective, to take a new viewpoint, to do something they formerly could not. This seems to point to what is most 'personal'

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[14] For reasons of space, in the later cases reported here it was not possible to supply details of these contexts. They are, however, more easily accessible to readers by other means.
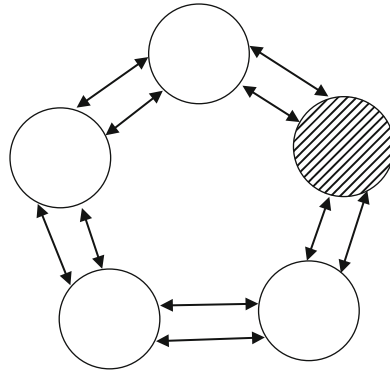
Fig. 2 Wisdom as residing in processes that evolve over time, often in conjunction with others

about their wisdom. It may take partially ethical form, as when it is someone's personal integrity that is especially enabling or convincing to others. Personal wisdom *activates* general wisdom, perhaps. But wise people, in this particular discursive presentation, do not resemble saintlike figures envisaged as patient or calm (hagiographies suggest that not all saints resemble this image either). Nor, to the extent that wise behaviour constitutes a contribution to the conduct of others, should wise people be expected to be behaving wisely all the time and in all respects. Moreover, processes involved in the recognition of wisdom by others who are not necessarily wise may be part of its operation and should be studied on their own account. Conversely, in this form of the phenomenon, it seems to be recognising wisdom in *others'* interventions and remarks that helps wise people to take decisions in relation to their own lives.

I have explicitly sought to explore understandings of wisdom which do not lay their first stress on features internal to the individual, but it has emerged that they claim more than that: they appear to see wisdom as residing in processes which evolve over time and which take place not just *between* individuals but often *in conjunction with others*. In Fig. 2 below, the *links* are as important as the individuals themselves. The wise person (shaded) enhances a process of which he or she forms part; this whole process needs to be studied in order for the instantiation of 'wisdom' to be grasped.

This version of how wisdom operates allows that some people behave more conducively to wise processes than others and are more effective within them – this is their personal wisdom. But it does not limit wisdom to properties of these individuals. This is not to deny the relevance of particular traits and capacities in this discourse; but it directs attention to other processes too. First, traits and activities involved in wise processes (such as friendliness or tolerance) might not always be those identifiable as 'wise' on their own; they can also be observed in cases which we might not term wise, whatever their other virtues. Conversely, individuals might be striking for characteristics such as stubbornness or authoritarianism which we might want to exclude from association with wisdom, yet they might behave wisely as the

outcome of an interactive process. Sean Murphy's neighbour might not have been wise, indeed this example suggests the contrary, but he was distressed enough about his relations with his son to shift his position in the end. The process involved in achieving the shift itself can be regarded as wise. Secondly, exploring process-dependent versions of wisdom suggests that we investigate what their social structures are expected to be, whether or not hierarchical, for instance. The interviewee in Connemara said, 'We're no wiser than anybody else, and it's foolish to think that we are … But we can, without having to be wise we can be very helpful to others …' People considered wise in these discursive settings do not seem to present themselves as superior to others (Gallagher & Edmondson, 2010).

Within this account of personal wisdom there are further implications for the question why people considered wise by most others (famously including Socrates) so often decline to accept this description. When they take part in social processes evolving over time, it must often be the case that they only *know* part of these processes. They may not know immediately what effects particular conversations have (as in the case of Sean Murphy and his neighbour), and especially in the case of longer-term developments they cannot be sure what parts they themselves have played. To the extent that their *personal* wisdom is envisaged as consisting in the vivid illumination of wise forms of conduct for others, they cannot be expected always to be aware of it.

This version of what wisdom is helps cast some light on the elusiveness sometimes attributed to it: the more people are involved in a wise process, the harder it may be to envisage and track. Sociality itself is difficult to describe univocally. Nonetheless, explicating this account of wisdom further might help to interpret connections often made between wisdom and 'the common good'. This heavily contested term was central to Cicero's political view of wisdom, and in the work of Sternberg (1998), it underlines the complexity of possible conflicts of interest between individuals or groups in situations needing wise mediation. Woerner (2010) points out that 'wise' debate may centre on 'matters of profound significance for human beings' rather than explicitly on 'the common good'. Woerner's suggestion can be read as directing us towards the *variety* of ways in which wise people are seen as contributing to what is done by others, especially given ethical and political aspects often attributed to these fields (see also Ardelt, 2010; Baltes, Glück, & Kunzmann, 2002; Staudinger, 2001). Sean Murphy's remark to his neighbour was not an explicit contribution to the common good. But arguably, it enhances the common good if fathers can be brought to understand their sons and their own parts in influencing them; *we* might argue that 'the common good' can embrace conversations like this, even if the wise person concerned did not.[15]

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[15] It would be important to pursue further possible connections between this view of wisdom and democratic discourse. Distinctions and connections need also be explored between interactions attributed to individual 'minds' (Marcel 1954; Baltes & Staudiner, 1996; Staudinger, 1990; Staudinger and Bowen 2010) and those seen as predominantly social phenomena (Dittman-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Edmondson, 2005; Meeks & Jeste, 2009).

There remains a plethora of questions for understanding processual interpretations of 'wise people'. In Fig. 2, for example, the two-way and multitiered arrows are intended to point to the mutuality of the processes involved and the complexity of their composition. But, to use a term characteristic of the Berlin group, in this version of wisdom too, we need to know more about what is thought of as being 'orchestrated' and how. The ethnographic approach I have outlined suggests that Fig. 2 is defective at least in depicting individuals as imagined here with relatively clear-cut boundaries. Gallagher (2008) speaks of a 'ripple effect' in connection with the activities of wise older people in their communities; here, wisdom seems actually to *reside in* interaction itself, a social phenomenon as much as an interpersonal one. As the tale of the Seven Sages perhaps asks us to consider, we may sometimes believe that individuals are acting wisely (or unwisely) when this version of wisdom points instead to the social situations they jointly constitute. The personal wisdom attributed to key actors in these situations may derive from their impacts on their fellows, from the ethical integrity which convinces them to follow wise courses to the engagingness and ease with which they are helped towards what Ferrari, Peskin, Petro, and Weststrate (2010) term an understanding of the human condition.

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