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What Is Wisdom?

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Wisdom is something we would all like to have. “But where,” Job asked (28:12), “is wisdom to be found?” In this talk, I want to venture some ideas about where it is in fact to be found. My answer will not be the one to which Job was drawn, namely “the fear of the Lord”, though I do not suppose that what I say will exclude this. Also, I caution you that though I hope that these reflections will be informative, they will offer you no recipe about how to become wise.

I shall be proceeding in two stages. First, I shall lay out a formal definition of wisdom. By a “formal definition” I mean a general account of the sort of thing wisdom is, an account that will distinguish it from other things with which it might be confused. A formal definition does not tell us substantively what the thing is, what its inner makeup is like or how it is likely to change over time. Its point is just to ensure that we all know what phenomenon we are talking about as we discuss what is in fact its nature and dynamics. That is why you should not expect anything particularly novel in the formal

definition I propose. Indeed, I will be putting it together by referring continually to what we ordinarily think makes a person wise. The controversial part will be what follows, as I go on to say more particularly what wisdom is. Here I will not be taking my bearings from accepted opinion. On the contrary, I will be challenging what I take to be pretty much the reigning view among philosophers (and not just them) about what it is to be wise.

I.

First, then, the formal definition. What do we mean when we talk about wisdom? Wisdom certainly involves knowledge, but are the two the same? Are we wiser the more we know? That is surely too simple an equation. Wisdom is not a function of the *amount* we know. I could sit outside on the lawn and count all the blades of grass, note down their dimensions and weight, catalogue all the different species, become indeed the world's leading (and no doubt only) expert on that lawn (though I do not mean any disrespect to the people in Facilities Management), and yet obviously be no wiser than before.

Wisdom, one might therefore think, depends on the *value*, not on the quantity, of what we know. No one can become wiser by studying grass in whatever depth, because grass is of little or no significance. The wise person is not the polymath, chock full of facts, but the person whose knowledge is of what it is worth knowing about. Wisdom, so the proposal would go, consists in valuable knowledge. However, this definition too leaves a lot to be desired. Knowledge can prove valuable for any number of reasons that do nothing to establish that the person possessing it is wise. To return to our example:

knowing about the in's and out's of grass can be a precious asset if one is in the lawn treatment business, though graminology (that is the name for the science of grass) is unlikely to be even an ingredient in what makes any person wise.

A revision that may now suggest itself is that wisdom is not simply valuable knowledge, but *intrinsically valuable* knowledge – knowledge that is worth having for its own sake, apart from the ulterior ends it may enable us to achieve. That will presumably suffice to rule out graminological expertise as an element of wisdom. But will this revised definition work? I think not. First of all, there are many kinds of intrinsically valuable knowledge that need not involve any wisdom on the part of those who possess them. Consider, for instance, the case of pure mathematics: there is a beauty to mathematical proofs, particularly when they connect seemingly disparate abstract notions in deep and illuminating ways, that is one of the great delights of the mind, whatever may be the physical or technological applicability of the theorems. Yet such knowledge is not in itself a form of wisdom. (Though I caution that I do not mean by this that knowing that one ought to devote oneself to such knowledge may not be a matter of wisdom; the significance of this remark will become apparent later on).

Secondly, there is knowledge whose value is essentially instrumental, but which is of the sort we consider the hallmark of a person who is wise. All of us have acquired a lot of truths about the world and about ourselves. Yet we often go wrong when trying to put them into practice. Now the wise person is one who we commonly say is able to put knowledge to use, to determine how it may be relevant in a given situation, to apply it successfully to the problems he or she encounters. In general, the ability to apply our knowledge rarely consists in knowing a set of rules instructing us how to proceed.

Indeed, there is a limit to how much a knowledge of rules for the application of knowledge can accomplish, since rules themselves have to be applied. Often it is through training that we know how to make use of the knowledge we have acquired. But training too has its limits, and sometimes however well-informed and well-trained we may be, what can only be called “insight” is needed to deal effectively with the problems before us. These are the sorts of occasion where we think wisdom can come into play. And – this is my point – wisdom seems then to have a value that is essentially instrumental: it enables us to make good use of our knowledge of the world and ourselves.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that knowing how to apply creatively our knowledge in practice is all that there is to wisdom. Quite the contrary. There are many cases where a person exhibits an uncanny ability to apply his or her knowledge to the solution of problems, but where we would not consider the person to be wise. Imagine the very skillful graminologist who knows just what to do to make your lawn flourish. You might of course call him “wise” in a humorous tone of voice, but that is because you are thinking of how in a very abstract way – leaving aside the fact that he is dealing with grass and lawns – he resembles the person we would truly call wise. But what sort of person is that?

You may think that very little progress has been made in answering that question, that we are right back where we started, but I do not think the situation is so bleak. We have in fact arrived at some conclusions that point us in the right direction. Wisdom is not the same thing as intrinsically valuable knowledge, and it seems indeed to be of an essentially instrumental nature. But it cannot of course be just any sort of instrumentally valuable knowledge; our graminologist is there to remind us of that fact. So what kind of

instrumentally valuable knowledge does it involve? The reason why the graminologist, however gifted, does not count as wise is that what he uses his knowledge for – the production of beautiful lawns, for instance – is of insufficient moment. Does this mean that his goal is not of intrinsic value? Not at all. It can be nice to have a beautiful lawn, and for its own sake, not just to be the envy of the neighbors. Does it mean that the goal is not of very great value? Not that either. Imagine, to change the example, a gifted chemist who makes creative use of existing knowledge to devise a life-saving drug. Certainly a benefactor of mankind. But would we for this reason consider her to be wise? I think not.

No, wisdom is the sort of knowledge, I believe, whose goal is to secure, to enable us to achieve, what has *ultimate* value. Let me explain. The ultimately valuable is not the same as the intrinsically valuable. Something may be of intrinsic value – doing pure mathematics, for instance – and yet it can still make sense to ask of that activity, why is it valuable? It won't be valuable because it leads to some further end, since it is (by hypothesis) intrinsically, not instrumentally, valuable. But there can still be an explanation of why it is valuable: because its value consists in something it involves – in this case, relishing the beauty of deep and surprising proofs – or in the place it occupies in a larger whole. What is of ultimate value is, by contrast, something about which it makes no sense to ask why it is valuable, since its value is what grounds the value (intrinsic or instrumental) that everything else may happen to possess.

What then is it that has ultimate value? There can only be one answer, as Aristotle pointed out long ago.¹ It is living well (what he termed “eudaimonia”) that is of

¹ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I.7 (1097b).

ultimate value, since it makes no sense to ask ourselves why living well is good. Any answer we might give would have to say that living well is good because it – what? – helps us to live well. Eudaimonia, as Aristotle said, is the highest good because whatever else is good is good in virtue of how it connects with living well. Now wisdom is the knowledge we need in order to live well. Its value is instrumental because of what it enables us to do, but it differs from every other sort of instrumentally valuable knowledge because it serves the cause of what is ultimately good. Wisdom is knowing how to live well, and that means, of course, knowing how to make good use of our knowledge of the world and ourselves in order to live as well as we can.

This, as I cautioned you, is but a formal definition. So you should rightly feel little informed by the result at which we have arrived. That, you should say, is just what I always thought wisdom was, and if you are saying that, then I have succeeded. I have not yet tried to say anything substantial about the nature of wisdom. I have, so far, sought only to show how wisdom differs from other sorts of knowledge that we might also desire to have. Now we proceed to more controversial matters.

There are two distinct dimensions involved in living well, and wisdom has an essential role in guiding us along them both. One of these dimensions consists in what we owe to others, the concern that we should show for their good, whereas the other concerns the pursuit of our own good. Some philosophers (Aristotle was one) have thought that the first dimension can be grounded in the second, that if we understand aright the nature of our own good we will see that it involves a concern for the good of others that is equivalent to what can properly be called our moral obligations to them. I

am enough of a follower of Immanuel Kant (though not in the end very much of one) to think that this is wrong. Some people may be such that a proper understanding of their own good would direct them toward doing well by others, treating them as they morally ought to do. But even in such cases, the authority of the moral claims of others that are binding on them does not have its foundation in the makeup of their own good. Such people are simply fortunate enough that their good happens to converge with what the good of others requires of them. For the moral claim that the good of others makes on us is grounded fundamentally in their good, and not in ours. What it is to take up the moral point of view is to see in another's good the same reason for immediate concern, unmediated by ulterior considerations, that we quite naturally see to concern ourselves with our own good.

In this talk I shall not delve further into the role that wisdom plays in helping us see how to do well morally by others, or how to handle the conflicts – which for most of us do arise – between the pursuit of our own good and what we owe morally to others. That is certainly an important subject. But my focus will be our own good, and what it is to pursue it wisely.

II.

Among philosophers both ancient and modern, the reigning view has been that we live well, so far as our own good is concerned, to the extent that we shape our lives in accord with a rational plan. Life is too serious a matter, it is held, for us to let it be the plaything of the forces at work outside us. We ought instead to take control of our existence so far we can, weighing carefully our circumstances, abilities, and interests, in

order to determine the makeup of our good as well as the most efficient means to achieve it.

This way of thinking has been, as I have said, the dominant view. I will not try to prove the point by running through a lot of passages from the works of the great philosophers. I will trust to what I suspect is your own immediate sympathy with such a view of life in order to suggest that it is a conception so widespread as not to be merely the property of philosophers. It is one that we all find it natural to endorse.² It is however, as I shall now proceed to argue, a view that is deeply mistaken. The idea that life should be the object of a plan, that we live our life well to the extent that we take charge of how it goes, shaping it so far as we can in accord with a rational assessment of our prospects, is false to the reality of the human condition. It misses the important truth that Proust once formulated so well in that great work, A la recherche du temps perdu, that pursues it relentlessly: "En échange de ce que l'imagination laisse attendre et que nous nous donnons inutilement tant de peine pour essayer de découvrir, la vie nous donne quelque chose que nous étions bien loin d'imaginer."³

Let me first, however, say a bit more about why this idea of living our life according to a rational plan can prove so attractive. Its appeal lies in the attitude toward life that it embodies. This attitude is that our life is something that we are to lead, not

² Evidence from the philosophical tradition can be found in Chapter 10 of my book, The Autonomy of Morality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), in which I presented a much more detailed version of the critique of the idea of a life plan that I lay out here.

³ Proust, Albertine disparue (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1992), p. 83. "In exchange for what our imagination leads us to expect and which we vainly give ourselves so much trouble to try to discover, life gives us something which we were very far from imagining".

something – so far as this lies in our power – that we should allow to happen to us. We flourish as human beings, one supposes, only if we direct our lives ourselves, instead of leaving them to be the hostage of chance and whim. If such is our outlook, then we should indeed seek to live in accord with some unified conception of our overall purposes and of the path to achieve them. In other words, we should devise for ourselves some "plan of life" at least in its broad strokes, if not fine-tuned in its smallest details. To the extent that we develop our plan in a rational way, giving due weight to our beliefs about what is valuable, our knowledge of our own abilities, and our sense of the possibilities the world provides, we will have determined the character of our good and the way to achieve it. For it is on these three factors – our fundamental *interests*, our *capacities*, and our *circumstances* – that the makeup of our individual good depends.⁴ Wisdom would thus seem to consist in knowing how to weigh these factors together so as to work out an idea of what it would for us to live well and of what we must do in order to achieve it.

Now a life plan need not be anything so absurd as the attempt to program from the outset the various milestones to be passed every five or ten years of one's life – college at twenty, consulting firm at thirty, married at thirty-five with two children (a boy and a girl) and complete happiness, a country house at forty, professional glory at fifty, and all of it capped off with a splendid retirement in Florida. Though such clichés are what the term might easily suggest in today's world (or in the world before our present crisis), the basic idea looks a lot more reasonable. To live in accord with a rational plan of life is to

⁴ Cf. the conception of an individual's good presented by John Rawls in [A Theory of Justice](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) §§60-66. Rawls uses this conception to work out one of the most detailed accounts there is of the idea of a life plan; I examine it critically in the work cited in footnote 2.

pursue what we have discovered on careful reflection to constitute our true good, our best possibilities. To be sure, there can be no guarantee that our efforts will be crowned with success. However, the attraction of the idea is that in living thus we will have done the best we could. If we fail to realize our plan, as certainly we may, we will have much to regret. But we will not, so it is held, have anything for which to reproach ourselves.

This conception of life may seem so sensible that one might wonder what could possibly be amiss. I am tempted to say that it is too sensible. Yet that would be the wrong way to formulate the objection. At question is what really defines a sensible attitude toward life. A clearer way to put my complaint is to say that this frame of mind embodies too great a timidity with regard to the power of experience to change what it is that makes life worth living. It supposes that we should take charge of our lives, bringing them under our rule as best we can. But in reality the choice before us is not the dichotomy that is being assumed – between leading a life or instead letting life happen to us. Neither of these extremes is conducive to a flourishing existence. The good life is a life that is not just led but met with as well, a life that is both self-directed and shaped from without. We miss an important aspect of what gives our life meaning when we imagine that our good can be the object of an all-embracing plan. Our lives go well, not only when we achieve the good we plan for, but also when unlooked-for goods happen to befall us.

In order to clarify my objection to the idea of a life plan, it will be helpful if I run through some possible worries that are not what it is that I find objectionable. First, consider the very idea of a life. One might wonder whether a life as a whole, and not simply this course of action or that trait of character, can properly be the object of ethical

evaluation. Does an individual's life display enough internal cohesiveness that we can rightly ask whether, taken as a whole, it counts as successful or not? Some philosophers have said that every life reveals the "unity of a quest" or has the shape of some "fundamental project", and such talk is surely unrealistic. As a rule, our lives hang together to the extent they do in virtue of their involving a host of overlapping and intersecting goals and activities, and not because they express any single all-embracing purpose. Nonetheless, this sort of complexity is no reason to conclude that a life as such cannot rightly be deemed good or bad, flourishing or stunted. For we cannot live our lives except by thinking about them in these comprehensively evaluative terms. However variegated the fabric of our lives may be, we still see them as our own and feel a stake in how they go. It is natural and reasonable to reflect on one's life as a whole and to wonder whether there may not be a better way to live than one does at present. Who among us has not had, or would want to give up, those moments when we pause to take stock of our interests, abilities, and circumstances in order to make out more clearly the kind of person we really want to be?

Now, turn to the idea of planning. There are also some familiar doubts about planning that are not what I have in mind in objecting to the idea that a life lived well is a life lived in accord with a rational plan. My point is not, for instance, that some goods by their very nature elude the art of planning. It is, in any case, far from clear that this is really so. Spontaneity – to consider the good most often invoked in this regard – may be a value that we cannot achieve at will. All the same, there exist indirect methods (putting ourselves in situations we know are likely to move us to act naturally and without reflecting) by which it can come within our reach. Nothing therefore stands in the way of

having spontaneity figure among the ingredients of a suitably sophisticated plan of life. So, too, with love. We cannot plan to fall in love, but there are certainly things we can choose to do, and to avoid doing, that will increase the likelihood of falling in love and finding love in return. (We can go to parties, strike up conversations, and always remember to brush our teeth). The trouble with the idea of a life plan is not the possibility that certain goods by their very nature defy pursuit by means of planning. It is that a life itself cannot properly be the object of a plan.

Secondly, the mistake I have in mind is not the failure to recognize that our best-laid schemes can always go awry. Certainly our plans, when put into practice, risk defeat at the hands of reality. And disappointment may seem inescapable when so complicated a matter as our life as a whole is made the object of a plan. Many people have raised this sort of difficulty against the idea of choosing a way of life, none perhaps so movingly as Samuel Johnson in his novel, Rasselas. In this story, the young prince Rasselas, cloyed by his pampered existence in the Happy Valley, escapes in order to forge his own way in the world. His faith is that with experience will come the ability to make, as he says, the proper "choice of life". But Imlac, his tutor, attempts to disabuse him of this hope. Our grasp of how the world is put together is too unreliable for any such choice to stand a real chance of success. "The causes of good and evil", Imlac insists,

are so various and uncertain, so often entangled with each other, so diversified by various relations, and so much subject to accidents which cannot be foreseen that he who would fix his condition upon incontestable reasons of preference, must live and die inquiring and deliberating.... Very few live by choice. Every man is placed in his present condition by causes which acted without his foresight, and with which he did not always willingly cooperate.⁵

⁵ Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, chapter XVI

There is considerable insight in these observations, but they do not really suffice to break the hold of the idea of a life plan. Tangled and unpredictable though the ways of the world may be, we can always set our sights on ends that seem minimally threatened by chance or misfortune. To choose our purposes so as to minimize the risk of being thwarted by reality has been in fact a frequent basis on which the philosophical tradition in question has elevated the life of virtue above the pursuit of more inconstant goods such as honor or wealth. True, this line of argument can ultimately lead to quite perverse results, such as the Stoic maxim that we should remain unmoved by the loss of those things (family, friends, political liberty) that do not depend on us. Moreover, the virtue whose possession is the source of the Stoic's pride is itself the fruit of circumstances, such as upbringing and associations, over which he can have little control. Probably no way of life can escape altogether the play of luck. But the fragility of whatever good we may achieve is not the reason why the idea of a life plan is false to life.

The essential mistake lies at a more fundamental level. It has to do, not with the vulnerability of our plans, but rather with the drawbacks of planning itself. We close ourselves off to a significant aspect of the human good if we believe that our attitude toward life must at bottom be one of foresight and control, as the idea of a life plan entails. On the contrary, we live well when we are not simply active, but passive too. There is an openness to life's surprises which it behooves us to maintain. For instead of being the mishap that sadly defeats our plans, the unexpected can turn out to be the windfall that discloses new vistas of meaning and forms of happiness that we least suspected or never imagined and that may change our lives and who we are in the most far-reaching ways. Sometimes we learn that we have been mistaken in the things we

have hitherto valued. Sometimes instead we learn to appreciate human goods of which we had little understanding before, and making them our own is likely to alter the complexion of our other commitments as well. Revelations of this sort do not, moreover, always require some novel input from the world. As Proust portrayed so powerfully, memory can jolt us into seeing our past in an unaccustomed light, reminding us of forgotten or neglected sources of happiness that no longer figure in our current self-understanding. In general, our good as it takes shape at any given time mirrors the course of our lives up until then, and as life goes on and shows us new ways one may flourish and find meaning in the world, we learn to appreciate what before lay beyond our ken.

III.

Before I go further, I need to pause and say a bit about an arch-philosophical question that may well have been nagging at you for some time. Plainly I have been assuming that value and the good, including what it is to live well and the unexpected goods I have just evoked, have a certain "objectivity". They are something about which we can be right or wrong, can have true or false beliefs – an object of knowledge that we discover, often through the exercise of wisdom.

Many people, philosophers included, will regard such talk as at best a mere *façon de parler*, not to be taken seriously, since they are convinced that in general the good can only be the projection of desire: to say that a thing is good, they claim, is simply to express our desire for it, along perhaps with our desire that others too should similarly desire it. This sort of subjectivism, however widespread, embodies, I believe, a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of desire and of what it is to call something

good. Desire and goodness are certainly connected, but the order of explanation is just the reverse. Every desire represents its object as desirable, as something there is a reason to pursue – as something that we need, as something that would satisfy our interests, or as something that, if we managed to acquire it, would make us exactly like those we esteem. The notion of a “brute desire”, an impulse that simply comes over us without any sense of its object being desirable, is a philosophical fiction. To appear worth desiring, however, is precisely what it means for something to present itself as “good”. Desire therefore depends on perceived good, and not the other way around. Even when we desire a thing that we know we should avoid, acknowledging the better but following the worse (as Ovid said, *video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*), the worse must still appear good in some light or other: we must see some reason, however ill-considered from the standpoint of our better self, to think that we should make it ours. Our desires are responsive to what we take to be good, to what we see a reason to desire. What it means to speak of an *objective* good ought not therefore to be puzzling or mysterious. It is something that there really is reason for us to pursue.

Now, after this excursus, let us return to our main topic, in order to pursue further what is wrong with the idea that wisdom requires, so far as our own good is concerned, that we devise a rational plan of life.

Within the broad category of the objectively good there is an important distinction between the various forms of the human good in general and the particular elements of what make up our individual good. Our own good – the best life of which we are capable – cannot encompass every kind of good there is. Each of us, at our best, can be but a fragment of humanity. What counts as our own good has to fit who we are and the range

of possibilities that are specifically ours. It consists in those goods, as I have noted before, that we ourselves have reason to pursue, given the three fundamental factors that govern however it is that our lives will go – our circumstances, our capacities, and our fundamental interests.

Now it is precisely by looking at the role of these three factors that we can see clearly the mistake at the heart of the idea of a life plan. If we are to shape our lives in accord with a rational plan, we have to be able, at least in principle and presumably once we have reached a certain age, to make out the nature of our good in advance of actually going on to live our lives. Only if our good counts as already settled, can it be reasonable to suppose that we should make it the object of a plan that will enable us to achieve it. Yet the very factors on which our good depends – our circumstances, our capacities, and our fundamental interests – are not given once and for all. They are caught up in the twists and turns of life, and as they change in the very course of our living, sometimes in unforeseeable ways, our good too must change and may well take on a character we could not have anticipated beforehand.

The truth overlooked by the notion of a life plan is therefore not simply that every conception we devise of how we ought best to live our lives, reflecting as it must the limitations of our previous experience, is bound to fall short of what life has yet to teach us. That is certainly so. But a more profound truth is at stake. Not solely our understanding of our good, but our good itself changes with time and in ways we are unable to foresee. The idea of a life plan assumes that our good is a matter already determined, awaiting our discovery, so that our task, if we are wise, must be to discern its makeup and then to devote our energies to securing it. It is compatible with this idea that

any plan of life we devise may have to be revised as we gather new evidence. But what this idea cannot accommodate, the truth it fails to acknowledge, is that in reality our good only takes shape in the very course of living and as a result of how our life happens to go. As we live, no matter how much we try to shape our live according to a rational plan, we are bound to stumble into situations and experiences that change the very factors on which our individual good depends.

A flourishing life cannot therefore be essentially a matter of our own making. And not merely because what constitutes our good may run up against reality and prove difficult or impossible for us to achieve in practice. Once again, the crucial fact lies deeper. It is that the very conditions that determine what our good is – our circumstances, capacities, and fundamental interests – change and change in unexpected ways as a result of how we actually live. We are never in a position to grasp in advance the full character of our good, even in its broad outline, since it has no such character prior to the actual business of living. Our happiness encompasses not only the anticipated good we manage to attain, but also the unexpected good that enters our lives in ways we could not anticipate – perhaps as the unforeseen result of our own actions or as the boon that the actions of others send our way.

Life is then too unruly to be the object of a plan, and not simply because our schemes may founder when they come to be applied. Often we do fail to achieve the good we pursue. But equally important is the fact, the happy fact, that the good we have at any point reason to pursue is likely to fall short of the good that life has yet to disclose. We need therefore to recognize and welcome our dual nature as active and passive beings, bent on achieving the goals we espouse, but also bound to run into forms of self-

fulfillment we could never have anticipated. I do not mean to suggest that planning is wrong or futile. That would be foolish. Prudence – for that is what planning means – is an undeniable virtue, and not solely in the handling of the little things of life. We cannot hope to live well if we do not direct ourselves to achieving goals that have a ramifying significance, that organize our various activities and give our lives meaning. But we err if we suppose that prudence is a supreme virtue and that the good life is one that unfolds in accord with a rational plan.

I observed earlier that one of the main motivations behind the notion that we ought to live our lives in accord with a rational plan, taking stock of our circumstances, capacities, and interests, is that thus we will be able to avoid any eventual self-reproach. Our plan may turn out to fail in the face of reality, and that will be an occasion for regret. But, so the thinking goes, we will not then have any grounds on which to reproach ourselves since we will have done the best we could. My counter-argument shows, however, that there is really no way we can be sure to escape that eventuality. Devising a rational plan of life is, as I just noted, an exercise of prudence, applied to our existence as a whole. But prudence, however carefully exercised, cannot be immune to the possibility of self-reproach. For sometimes we can have reason to reproach ourselves for having been prudent at all, for having so carefully deliberated about what to do. In retrospect, we may think that, instead of weighing our options judiciously, we ought to have acted impulsively, letting ourselves be carried away by the passions of the moment, since then (as we now may be able to recognize) a good we could not have foreseen at the time would have become part of our thought and action. There can be no guarantees in life, not even the guarantee that if we reason things out the best we can, we will have no

occasion to criticize ourselves – not of course for not having reasoned better, but instead for having trusted so much to our reasoning. However worthy a trait it may be, prudence is not a supreme value, since in fact, so I believe we should say more broadly, no single value enjoys that status: nothing is so important that, in certain circumstances, something else may not matter more.

The belief in the supremacy of prudence is, in fact, mistaken for two reasons. The key reason is the one I have been exploring: that if we give life a chance, it always turns out to be richer in possibilities than any conception we could have at the time of what it would be to flourish. To make our life the object of a plan, however well-informed and carefully arranged the plan might be, means closing our minds to what the future may unforeseeably bring our way as the very act of living causes us to bump into experiences that change our circumstances, interests, and capacities.

But in addition there is the fact that our lives would mean less if they did not contain those moments of wonder and redirection when we find that earlier actions or new conditions have led to a happiness we could never have imagined, when we see our existing purposes thrown into disarray by the realization that our fulfillment lies elsewhere. We would live less well if our projects, however rational, were never tripped up by unforeseen goods that impel us to rethink the way we live. For not only do we then encounter a good we could not foresee, but such experiences are themselves of inestimable value. They drive home an important truth about what it is to be human.

That truth is the essential contingency that lies at the heart of whatever, for each of us, happiness or living well may signify. Precisely because the unexpected good can upset the most rational plans, it is to be understood, not as a part of what our overall good

has always been (if unrecognized), but instead as a new turn in what our good has come to be. Had our experience gone otherwise, as it could well have done, our good itself (and not just our efforts to discern it) would have been different. Such is the invaluable insight that only such moments of surprise can truly provide us. We are creatures for whom the character of our good takes shape only through the act of living and with the impress of chance. At no point does our good exist as a finished end, waiting to be discovered and made the object of pursuit. The goodness itself of some human possibility may exist independently of its particular importance for our own lives; but when a good comes to form part of our individual good, contrary to all we had hitherto reason to expect, our good itself has changed. It is in large part the fruit of experiences we stumble into, and thus as much the unintended result of our actions as the goal they may set out to achieve. The good life outruns the reach of planning because its very nature is to be the child of time. To recognize this truth is the beginning of wisdom, for it is to understand why wisdom is something more than prudence.