

Practical Wisdom in Psychotherapy and Religion:

Abstractionist versus Relational Accounts

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Abstract

The nature of practical wisdom has long been a vital concern, from the ancient Chinese and Hebrews to contemporary psychologists and clergy. Although the issue of wisdom's concreteness or abstractness is pivotal in our Western culture, many contemporary dispensers of Western wisdom have satisfied themselves with relatively abstract versions of wisdom. In this paper, we try to show that the modern satisfaction with abstract versions of wisdom is due to a hidden ontology of Western culture, abstractionism. We apply the discussion of abstractionism to two major dispensers of contemporary Western wisdom, psychotherapists and clergy. We attempt to show not only how abstractionism has influenced these groups but how, ultimately, it has failed them, especially in view of what we call the messiness of everyday life. Finally, we explore an alternative to this ontology, strong relationality, and argue that it better addresses the questions involved in practical wisdom.

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The nature of practical wisdom has long been a vital concern, from the ancient Chinese and Hebrews to contemporary psychologists and clergy. Practical wisdom has held its importance across time and cultures because it concerns, as Schwartz and Sharp (2011) put it, doing the right thing “the right way” (p. 5). According to Joseph Meeker (2006), practical wisdom involves a “profound understanding and deep insight...that does not lose sight of the particularity and concreteness” (p. 1) of the situations in which it is needed. As we will see, the issue of wisdom’s concreteness or abstractness is pivotal in our Western culture. Many contemporary dispensers of Western wisdom have satisfied themselves with relatively abstract versions of wisdom, leading to what Barry Schwartz calls the “loss of wisdom” in our contemporary culture (TED, 2009).

As we will try to show, the modern satisfaction with abstract versions of wisdom is due to a hidden ontology of Western culture, abstractionism. To bring this ontological discussion down to earth, we will apply it to two of the sanctioned dispensers of wisdom in Western culture, psychotherapists and religious clergy. We will attempt to show not only how they’ve been seduced by abstractionism but also how this ontological framework has ultimately failed them, especially in view of what we will call the messiness of everyday life. Fortunately, there is a fascinating ontological alternative that we can explore in lieu of abstractionism, strong relationality. And perhaps more fortunately, we have one of the prime dispensers of *ancient* wisdom to help us understand this alternative, Aristotle.

The Abstractionism of Modern Wisdom

As Heidegger (1962), Taylor (1985), Toulmin (1972), and many others have argued, abstractionist ontologies have dominated our Western intellectual consciousness for several centuries, often without recognition. Many of the more common ontologies, such as materialism, realism, idealism, and dualism are species of this more general ontology. Basically, abstractionism assumes that the most real and fundamental entities of this world are those entities that are abstracted from the context in which they appear. The tradition of laboratory science is a prime example of this ontology, because all things are considered best understood when they are sterilized of their natural context. Similarly, most Western understandings of ethics or truth rely on propositions that do not change in relation to context. The Ten Commandments and APA's own code of ethics rely on this abstract propositional nature, along with the values that unite most organizations. In this sense, abstractions are not just *present* in all these arenas and activities; they have a *special* position as somehow being more basic, more real, and more related to the truth of our world – hence, their ontological status.

What accounts for this special status in the Western world? We do not have the time here to recount pertinent historical events and movements, such as Plato's championing of abstractions in the Forms or the popularity of reductionism in the sciences or the penetration of rationalism into philosophy. We provide here a threefold understanding of abstractionism's appeal to the Western thinker—its unity, its unchangeableness, and its logicity. First, abstractions unite all sorts of seemingly diverse ideas and things, because they generally consist of the themes or similarities across our varied experiences. The word “men,” for example, is a simple abstraction that includes a number of quite varied individual males in this room. Second, fundamental abstractions are not thought to change; they are akin to Archimedean points of reference. Many religious people, for example, consider the abstractions of the Ten

Commandments to be an ethical foundation that everyone can rely on, regardless of their circumstances. A third appeal of abstractionism is its seeming logicity. Abstractions can be represented as logical propositions so easily that reasoning itself can seem abstractionist in nature.

This influential threefold appeal, involving important aspects of Western philosophy, religion, and science, has profoundly affected contemporary dispensers of practical wisdom. The effect has been so great that wisdom is routinely viewed as top-down, meaning that one begins with the most fundamental ideas and values, which are located at the top of the ladder of abstraction, and then one comes “down” this ladder to apply these abstractions to the practical and concrete. For our exemplar dispensers of wisdom, psychotherapists and religious clergy, this abstractionist view of wisdom implies that they should draw from abstractions about what is good or right, and then they should apply these principles to specific situations in the application process. Psychotherapists supposedly apply therapeutic theories and case conceptualizations, while clergy presumably apply scriptural principles and theological precepts.

But how do these high-level abstractions of what is right and good relate to the concrete and particular situations in which the right and good applies? Classically, abstractionists have assumed that the relation between abstraction and application was a logical one. Applications were viewed as the logical implications of the abstractions, often in an instrumental logic in which abstractions are the means to practical ends. Indeed, this is often the way the theories of psychotherapy are taught in clinical psychology training programs. If one knows the correct theory, then one supposedly knows instrumentally what this theory “implies” in the particular situation of the therapy session. A cognitive-behavioral therapist, for example, presumably

knows how to apply principles of reinforcement and rationality to extinguish maladaptive thoughts and behaviors.

The problem is, as any fledgling therapist will tell you, the notion of a straightforward, top-down logic for practice is a cruel myth. A cognitive-behavioral therapist may assume the importance of rational thinking and reinforcements but the cognitive-behavioral theory of reinforcement and rationality does not tell the therapist which reinforcements and thoughts matter with a particular client. Religious clergy are in a similar position in relating abstractions to their applications. The Ten Commandments may be a clear set of abstract propositions that need application, but these Commandments do not tell clergy how they are applied in specific sets of circumstances. One of my sons is a soldier in the US Special Forces. How the abstract proposition, “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” relates to his work is not a straightforward or merely logical implication. In fact, as any practicing therapist or clergy will tell you, there is an inherent messiness or complexity that comes with the practical level that is never accounted for or even anticipated from the high-level abstractions.

This problem for wisdom dispensers originates, as many profound problems have originated in Western culture, with dualistic conceptions. In other words, much like the difficulties Westerners have long had in relating mind and body, subjectivity and objectivity, and even Kohlberg’s separation of form and content (1981), the problems here originate with a similar dualism of relating the “top” with the “down,” the abstractions with their practical applications. Indeed, all these dualisms are themselves, we would hold, by-products of abstractionism, because this ontology abstracts all things and ideas from all other things and ideas, regardless of how related they may be in fact or practice. Consider the 54 separate divisions of APA as an apt illustration of this point.

Consider politics as another prominent example. In a short-lived television series in 2003, titled *Mr. Sterling*, Josh Brolin plays a neophyte who is appointed to the US Senate. He sees this appointment as an opportunity to inject “commonsense” and his own political ideals into the messiness of the senate, even if he is unpopular in doing so. The writers masterfully show not only how practical political decision-making is inherently messy but also how Mr. Sterling finds no alternative but to sacrifice parts of his ideology just to get votes to promote the other parts. To his amazement, his constituency considers him an outright turncoat. In the end, Mr. Sterling is disappointed with himself and confused by what has happened.

Abstractionist Messiness

We believe that this kind of disappointment and confusion indicates the failure of an abstractionist understanding of practical wisdom. Indeed, the very property that allows abstractions to unite particular experiences makes them unsuitable for being applied back to these particulars. The very abstraction process, the finding of commonalities and similarities across particular experiences, means that differences and particulars are necessarily filtered out. Yet, it is those differences that the abstractionist thinker then experiences as “messy” when the abstraction is applied back into the particulars of our daily lives.

As an academic of some 30 years’ experience, the first author has attended more than his share of university committee meetings. He has now a very refined conception or abstraction of how committees should be conducted. Yet, when he enters a university committee meeting with this idealized understanding, he is invariably disappointed in the messiness of the meetings. Indeed, it is not unusual that *everyone* walks away from these meetings disheartened. What is going on? We would like the reader to consider that it is our abstractionist expectations that have led us to be so frustrated. Our abstract ideals lead us to expect some approximation of a

smooth-running, well-oiled machine, as though the particulars of each person's context do not matter. The problem is, of course, that we *live* in a particular world with particular people who have particular sensitivities and sensibilities, so particular-free abstractions rarely serve us well, not only in telling us what to do in the particular situation, but also in helping us to know what to realistically expect.

In this sense, all the elements of the abstractionist appeal—its unity, its universality, and its logicity—simply do not pan out in the real world. They presumably work in abstractland, where no particularities and differences exist, but not necessarily in the real world. Abstractland is a bit like Garrison Keeler's Lake Wobegon, his mythical town where all the children are above average, except that the children of abstractland can have no particularities and differences, so they must *all* be average. It is not just by accident that many of our conventional statistics are primarily concerned with means, and thus the collapse of meaningful differences; these statistics are a by-product of abstractionism themselves.

Practical Wisdom in a New (Old) Relational Key

If this is indeed so, if the main ontology of Western culture is leading us to have unrealistic expectations and generally not allowing us to be very wise, especially in regard to the concrete particulars of our experiences—in therapy, in religion, in politics, and in committee meetings—then what other options are available? We, along with a number of other scholars (refs), have been exploring an alternative ontology, variously called ontological or strong relationality, that we believe can address many of these issues in a fresh way. Last year at APA, the lead author described an entire therapeutic boarding school in West Virginia that was based exclusively on strong relationality, so he has considerable experience with some of the practical ramifications of a relational ontology for psychotherapy. We have never been clergymen or

politicians, but we think we can discuss these vocations as well. How might this alternative ontology truly be alternative in this sense of practical wisdom?

Unlike abstractionism where things and ideas are most real and best understood apart from their contexts, the relationist views things and ideas as inextricably related to their contexts. As Colin Gunton (2003) puts it, they have a shared being; contexts and things are mutually constitutive of one another. They not only “interact;” they constitute the very identities and qualities of the other, as the “legs” of a stick figure constitute its “head.” Without the stick figure’s legs, the whole of the figure changes and the head no longer has the quality of a “head.” Indeed, it becomes the top portion of the symbol for a female. The same movement of one’s hand, depending on the context, can be a greeting, the beginning of child abuse, or a priestly blessing. In this sense, all persons, places, things, and ideas are related inextricably to their contexts, and as their contexts change, so do their identities and qualities.

This most immediately means that all the dualisms of the world make less sense: mind/body, fact/value, means/ends, subjectivity/objectivity, and content/process. While it may be helpful to make these distinctions for some purposes, they are not ontologically separable; indeed, they require each other for their very qualities and identities. Neuroscientists cannot truly separate the body from the mind; researchers cannot truly separate the objective from the subjective, and no one can truly separate facts from values. Indeed, all these dualisms have been clearly questioned by recent and even ancient scholars. Perhaps most pertinent to the issue of practical wisdom, the ethical relationist, Aristotle, argues that we cannot truly separate means and ends in the instrumentalist sense for truly virtuous actions. These actions require, in Fowers’ helpful language, constitutive ends—ends that constitute their means (2012). To make friends is to be friendly; to effect justice is to act justly. Moreover, Aristotle’s own brand of practical

wisdom is always and already grounded in the particulars of context.ⁱ Like most relationists, Aristotle agrees that this wisdom can be formed into abstractions, something he calls theoretical wisdom, but relationists do not believe that these abstractions are contextless, should be reified, or considered the truth of the world.

What does this relational wisdom mean for our dispensers of wisdom? First, as we mentioned on behalf of Aristotle, it implies that the good and the right of practical wisdom depend not on instrumental ends, but on constitutive ends. Ends such as friendship and justice require constitutive means like acting friendly and doing just things. Second, strong relationality implies that the reasoning of these wisdom dispensers is more akin to bottom-up, particulars to abstractions, than to top-down, with the “bottom” and the “up” not themselves ultimately separable. Therapists should take their cues less from their abstract theories and more from the particulars of the client in front of them. Third, practical wisdom shifts from a focus on the abstracted universal and unchangeable to a focus on the particular and changeable. What is truly wise for the therapist or clergy depends on the particular circumstances, which can change momentarily. Therapeutic and spiritual relationships are more like dancing with the concrete particulars than following a script of abstract principles. Dancing skills and principle-following are quite different skills.

Fourth, and perhaps most relevant to dancing skills, the similar and the logical are no longer the most salient in wisdom dispensing. Therapists, for example, should no longer attend to just the depressive episodes simply because of the abstraction of a depression diagnosis. Therapists should consider differences and the nonlogical as potentially just as important as similarities and the logical. Indeed, it is our experience that when we attend to differences in so-called “depressives” we find that they do not have merely depressive episodes; they also have

episodes of happiness and peace, on which we can build. Similarly, clergy and politicians do not have to submit completely to their abstractions; they can recognize that all such abstractions, including the Ten Commandments, can be important guidelines without being free of exceptions. Indeed, it was just a few years after the Ten Commandments were decreed that the Lord himself commanded the Hebrews to “not leave alive anything that breathes” (Deuteronomy 20:16, New International Version). The relationist has a way of understanding these seeming exceptions, including the need for politicians to sometimes abandon their ideologies and raise the debt ceiling!

Fifth, our ontological relationships to one another mean that humans are less dependent on rules for living and more dependent on one another. As Macmurray and McIntosh (2004) contend, it is *not* our developmental quest to become increasingly independent and self-sufficient. Rather, we should acknowledge and deepen our healthy and unavoidable dependency on one another. Therapists and clergy, in this sense, could question their ontological individualism. Therapists, in this sense, should foster virtuous dependencies, and perhaps even form an *independent* personality disorder. Theistic clergy, as Alister McGrath (2011) argues, should facilitate a dependence on God and their community, instead of a reliance on reified religious principles. Indeed, salvation for the Hebrews, for example, was originally communal in nature, and not an individual enterprise.

Relational “Messiness”

But what about the messiness issue? Recall that abstractionists deny the complexity, particularity, and what Dupre’ (1995) calls the “disorder” of the world in which we actually and concretely live, because abstractland, the world of ideals and absolutes, was supposedly the real truth of the world. The relationist, by contrast, expects and even welcomes this messiness.

Indeed, the connotation of something being “messed up” is itself framed from the abstractionist’s perspective; it assumes there’s some human reality that’s not “messed up” that we can aspire to. From the relationist’s perspective, on the other hand, the so-called messy phenomena of our experience constitute the variety that makes up the spice of life; they are the unpredictable, richness, and otherness of our experiences. The lead author has been happily married for 35 years, and he is convinced that *at least* as much of that happiness is due to differences and messiness as it is to similarities and abstracted neatness and efficiency. We think that e-harmony.com, the internet site that assumes marriage bonds come solely from similarities, is wrong in our relational view.

This relational view means that we expect and even develop skills for this messiness. Was the debt ceiling impasse really because our members of congress are idiots, as many talk-show hosts and voters have opined? Or could it be that these congressional members have a host of messy relationships and issues to navigate, and the correct decision is not always clear, at least clear in the sense of abstractland. What if, just for the sake of argument, our members of congress and the people who voted for them *expected* this messiness and even *prepared* for it? What if, for the sake of argument, marriages were not expected to go smoothly and newlyweds prepared for and were skilled in inevitable conflicts and differences? What if, for the sake of argument, we expected university committees not to go in some efficient manner, as dictated by the abstracted truths of good committee management? Wouldn’t the reality of messiness foster a modicum of humility, rather than the arrogance of my committee expectations?

Perhaps most problematic in regard to this arrogance is when the abstractionist assumes that wisdom depends on an abstracted, capital “T” truth. Once this truth is viewed as logical, unchangeable, and universal to everyone under every circumstance, as Jonathan Sacks (2002)

notes, there is little place to go in conversations about differences.ⁱⁱ If you seem to hold something that varies from our position, then we have very few good options. Either we abandon the Truth to affirm your position (relativism), or we tell you how far off you are (arrogance). Having lived in both the Bible Belt and the Book of Mormon Belt, we are quite aware of how religious conversations can go awry in this manner. However, we submit that we see versions of this conversational dynamic in all walks of life. Isn't it high time that we question this abstractionist approach to Truth and consider relational alternatives? As we have tried to describe with our therapist, clergy, and political examples, relationality is clearly the "new kid on the block," but we believe it has some fresh and practical insights into these issues and should be further explored.

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ⁱ One of the most frequently recurring features of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is Aristotle's insistence on the appreciation of the particular case as essential in ethical matters. He tells us that "matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity. . .the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion. . ." (Aristotle, 1999, p. 30) and "such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception" (p. 47).

ⁱⁱ Sacks (2002) puts it this way: "If all truth—religious as well as scientific—is the same for everyone at all times, then if I am right, you are wrong. If I care about truth I must convert you to my point of view, and if you refuse to be converted, beware. From this flowed some of the great crimes of history and much human blood" (p. 19).