Recovering Ancient Wisdom and the 2010 Albertan Education Reforms

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ABSTRACT: This paper critically examines the Government of Alberta's 2010 "Inspiring Education" Report in light of insights drawn from ancient philosophy and some of the world's wisdom traditions. The paper challenges the contention made throughout the Report that its recommendations are "transformational," for while they aim at securing greater future successes for students throughout Alberta, they do not contribute to the cultivation of wisdom whereby any such successes might be enjoyed; rather, evidence in the text of the Report suggests that the vision it espouses will serve to discourage the pursuit of wisdom, particularly in the Committee's demands for accountability and relevance aimed at innovation. Readers are invited to consider what an education-for-wisdom would look like. It is suggested that educational reforms truly concerned with such a "transformation" would need to include time throughout the day for teachers and students to cultivate their contemplative or noetic capacities in an atmosphere of leisure or *schole*.

RESUME: à l'appui d'idées tirées de la philosophie de l'antiquité et de certaines traditions de sagesse du monde, l'auteur de ce document porte un regard critique sur le rapport 2010 du gouvernement albertain; "Système éducatif qui suscite l'inspiration." Il conteste la thèse du rapport où il est dit que les recommandations de transformation, alors qu'elles visent à assurer de meilleures réussites pour les étudiants de l'Alberta, ne favorisent en rien la connaissance de la sagesse dans laquelle on peut apprécier ce genre de réussites. En fait dans le texte du rapport, il est sûr qu'on laisse plutôt à supposer que le but servira à éviter d'atteindre la sagesse, spécialement dans les revendications de la commission en matière de responsabilité et dans l'intérêt qui vise à accroître l'innovation. On invite le lecteur à envisager un système éducatif reposant sur la sagesse. On peut penser que des réformes dans l'enseignement qui reposent véritablement sur ce type de "transformation," devraient accorder du temps aux enseignants et aux élèves pendant la journée pour qu'ils puissent

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cultiver leurs aptitudes contemplatives ou noétiques dans un environnement de loisirs ou de "schole."

Introduction: Wisdom as a Lost Focus of Study in Education

The *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry for "Wisdom" records that the topic "has not received much treatment in the contemporary philosophical literature" (2007). Various academics have likewise observed that there is a dearth of modern scholarship concerning the nature of wisdom. For instance, Michael J. Chandler and Stephen Holliday remark: "Despite ... what amounts to more than 2000 years of written history in which the concept of wisdom has played a central part, the notion appears to have essentially vanished from the modern scientific scene" (1990, p. 126). Robert J. Sternberg concurs, writing that "wisdom does not have a long tradition of empirical research, and a purely cognitive view has never taken off" (1990, p. 151); elsewhere he comments, "educators need to take seriously identifying and developing wisdom. Although there has been some scholarship in the area, the amount is dwarfed by work on intelligence" (2003, p. 246). In other words, our concerns as educators with measuring student abilities and with improving our students' performance in critical-analytic work has taken priority over questions concerning wisdom and wisdom's pursuit. Indeed, wisdom as a good unto itself has fallen away in our modern consciousness, a fact commented on by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Kevin Rathu, who report that there has been little contemporary research that investigates wisdom as its own reward, or as a pleasure in its own right; in their estimation, all recent academic focus on the study of wisdom has concerned the lesser goods that may result from wisdom. These authors call the emerging desire to understand the nature and role of wisdom grounds for a "new field of study" (1990, p. 45).

To understand the point made here by Csikszentmihalyi and Rathu concerning how wisdom "as a good unto itself" has fallen away in our modern consciousness, we need to revisit much older articulations according to which wisdom was both prized and cultivated. In ancient and medieval understanding, wisdom or *sophia* was conceived of as the sole possession of divinity. For this reason, Pythagoras is said to have remarked that, "the god alone is wise." By participating in the god's knowledge – that is, in the most perfect knowing of the most sublime object of knowledge – human beings were thought to have a share in the divine nature. It is for this reason that Aristotle (2001) calls

philosophizing or "loving wisdom" the activity of "immortalization" (*to athanatizein*). The soul in pursuit of *sophia* is said to "immortalize" inasmuch as, through the act of contemplation (*theoria*), the knower experiences union with what is known in a relation that transcends mere subject-object knowing. Put another way, when the mind seeks not simply to know this or that aspect of what is, but rather desires to know "reality as such," or to know the ground of all that is, it becomes akin to what is known. Following Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas (n.d.) points out that through such noetic activity, the human soul, in a certain sense, is like God being "all in all." Thomistic scholar Josef Pieper explains Aquinas' statement here, pointing out that "to know" means for the mind "to have the forms of other things, to be the other thing, to be identical with the other thing, to be all in all." Knowing is, in ancient and medieval understanding, the identity between the knowing soul and reality, such that "truth is nothing else but the relation of identity between the mind and reality" (Pieper, 1989, pp. 92-93). Hence, the activity of seeking to know the most sublime object of knowing is to "immortalize" inasmuch as the knowing mind experiences truth through union with its most beloved object.

Already in this brief description of *sophia* we can see the problems that arise in a contemporary context, for clearly our openness to the pursuit of wisdom has diminished today. We are no longer willing to admit that such a thing as wisdom or *sophia* might exist; indeed, even to suppose that there might be such a thing as wisdom today would strike many of us as intolerant, offensive, even authoritarian; at the very least, *sophia* might appear caustic to the multicultural values of a pluralistic society. Hence, modern and contemporary thinkers in the field of education – even those who are unhappy with the current emphasis placed upon intelligence testing without concern for wisdom – have generally rejected the possibility of "Truth" or the language of "God," "the universal," or "the Good Itself" and hence the meaning of *sophia*. Education reformers who take this route, while rejecting *sophia*, nonetheless claim to remain concerned with the cultivation of virtue as it relates to good action in the world. They therefore emphasize the development of a kind of "practical wisdom" or *phronesis*, even suggesting that their modern approach to *phronesis* has its foundations in Aristotelian philosophy (Dunne, 1992).

However, this modern vision of "practical wisdom" is very much unlike ancient and medieval notions of *phronesis* inasmuch as it is based on a divorce of the ethical order from the divine order (Csikszentmihalyi

& Rathu, 1990, p. 34). Indeed, in their own work on the nature of wisdom as self-identified "evolutionary hermeneuticists," Csikszentmihalyi and Rathu affirm the legitimacy of dropping ancient conceptions of *sophia* on the grounds that such understandings no longer appear to resonate in modern or contemporary contexts. By and large, their sentiment is ubiquitous today among educationists who wish to affirm the significance of pursuing wisdom; the role of *sophia* is consistently minimized or even eradicated in favour of a humanistic conception of *phronesis*. According to this new vision of *phronesis*, wisdom becomes "the power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, and understanding" (Sternberg, 2007, p. 145).

Modern-day claims to be concerned with the cultivation of practical wisdom in education are certainly not new; indeed, they have already come to the fore with educationists like John Dewey and Douglas Lawson. However, it is essential to realize that what characterizes much modern and contemporary writing on *phronesis* is its disregard, its scorn, and its rejection of an entire realm of investigation: namely, *sophia*. For instance, in Joseph Dunne's (1992) immense study of Aristotle's views on wisdom, the subject of *sophia* is mentioned scarcely three times (1992). This sidelining and dismissal of *sophia* is perhaps most famously evinced in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, where he writes that "an ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory" (2007, p. 110); here, the contemplative activity (*theoria*) which, classically understood, is identical with *philosophia* or the "pursuit of wisdom," is dismissed; in Dewey's view, thinking ought always to be problem-based and analytic; its nature is discursive as opposed to the apprehensive or beholding activity of contemplation. Following Dewey, Lawson too derides contemplative knowing, or the activity of the mind exercising its leisure (*schole*), as an elitist and undemocratic activity that has no place in a truly democratic society (1961). Rather than dallying in an extensive analysis of all the current-day incidents of this orthodoxy concerning *phronesis* in education, we might simply take Lawson's exposition as representative of the vast bulk of modern opinion. *Sophia* is generally scorned and viewed either as an elitist pursuit, or as a false notion premised upon unwarranted assumptions about the existence of a "transempirical reality" – or both. "Practical wisdom" – some modern version of *phronesis* – is therefore viewed as the only realistic and socially responsible alternative.

Why has our concern for the cultivation of *sophia* in education atrophied? One reason is that the significance of cultivating wisdom in schools has been overshadowed by the paramount concern among education stakeholders with the development and assessment of critical-analytic thinking skills and academic abilities. Robert Sternberg, a psychologist and researcher who has investigated the international phenomenon of rising IQ's alongside questions about the nature and relevance of wisdom in education, finds no reason to rejoice in our supposedly greater intelligence quotient, for he sees no parallel increase in our wisdom. Sternberg puts the matter very well:

> Human intelligence has, to some extent, brought the world to the brink. Intelligence has brought us many good things, but also has brought us the nuclear weapons that have the power to destroy the world several times over as well as the addictive designer drugs that are destroying the lives of millions of people – young and old – around the world. Human intelligence has brought us where we are. Human intelligence, combined with creativity and practical intelligence, may have brought us the disaster at the World Trade Center that took place on September 11, 2001. The plan was creative, in its own way; it was analytically brilliant, evading the defenses of a nation; and it was practically shrewd, inflicting maximum damage for the number of people who were needed to carry it out. But the plan was not, for whatever else it may have been, wise, and the people who hatched it were not wise either. It may take wisdom to help us find our way out of a trap of our own making. (2003, p. 233)

Sternberg's insight here ought to have considerable import when we think about reforming education. Clearly, our educational efforts to train students for proficient thinking and adept discursive reasoning are not enough; indeed, even if it were possible for *all* of our students to develop masterful reasoning skills, this would not amount to the cultivation of wisdom. It would not suffice to bring us back from the brink.

A second reason why our concern for *sophia* has atrophied is that wisdom does not name any finite, measurable good with which we are familiar; rather, it names that good by which all other goods are measured. As the the highest of goods, it is what the ancients referred to as the *Ariston* or the *Summum Bonum*. The pursuit of this greatest of all goods naturally threatens our complacent sense of ourselves, for such a quest necessarily disturbs our comfort in those goods that we have named for ourselves as most important and most valuable; as is

famously portrayed in the Plato's *Apology* (1961, 21d) in person of Socrates, the pursuit of wisdom challenges our claims to know the things that we do not know; moreover, our system of education is set up in a way that frustrates the cultivation of wisdom, for it demands *not* that we search for that genuine good by which all other goods might be measured, but rather that teachers and students achieve *presumed* goods in the form of pre-ordained learning objectives; it is demanded of teachers that their pedagogy meet these prescribed outcomes, and that all of us be made accountable to the achievement of these pre-determined goals which are themselves held at a level beyond dispute. The human urge towards wisdom is essentially stultified and replaced by our fixation with curriculum documents, gruelling tests and assessment, and structures of accountability towards the fulfilment of the outcomes pre-established in those curriculum documents.

Despite our failure to cultivate the pursuit of wisdom in today's schools, there remains nonetheless a broad consensus that wisdom is an important component of education. Part of the problem facing educators in modern times is that, although we have become rather adept at thinking about how to cultivate the rational or cognitive processes associated with the measurement and improvement of intelligence quotients, we no longer seem able to think well about the nature of wisdom. Attempts ought to be made, therefore, to begin to understand what precisely is this deficiency in the way that we think about education and its relation to wisdom. How do we escape from the current conundrum so eloquently articulated by Sternberg? Namely, how ought we to respond to the fact that, although we are more technologically-advanced and more educated than ever before, still – and perhaps more so than ever before in history – we remain in the position of having brought not only ourselves but even the planet itself "to the brink?" Modern scholarship has failed to deal with this problem; it is therefore important for us to revisit and to rediscover ancient understandings of *sophia* as articulated by our philosophic heritage (for philosophy is *philia-sophia*, or "the love of wisdom") as well as in the world's various wisdom traditions and wisdom literatures.

Ancient Perspectives on Wisdom: Reforms Need to Introduce a Different Kind of Thinking into Education

Happiness is Contemplation (Theoria)

Education, most would agree, ought to enable us to find happiness. According to Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, "happiness (*eudaimonia*) is not a certain disposition of character (*hexis*)," since if it were, someone who remained asleep for his or her entire life could be happy, as could one who was plunged into the greatest misforune (2001, X.vi.2). Rather, happiness is identified as the activity (*energia*) of the best part of the soul in relation to its most excellent object. Ancient philosophic traditions are in general agreement that the best or "most divine" (*to theiotaton*) part of us is the intellect (*nous*), that its most excellent object is wisdom (*sophia*), and that the "happy" or eudaimonic activity of the *nous* in the pursuit of wisdom is contemplation or *theoria*. As such, *eudaimonia* cannot rightly be pursued as though it were a means to any other end; it is rather an end in itself. In this regard, the *energia* of happiness is the quintessentially *free* activity; as an art, the pursuit of happiness is the liberal art *par excellence*.

Contemplation, or *theoria*, says Aristotle, is the highest form of human activity since the mind (*nous*) "is the highest thing in us, and the objects with which the *nous* deals are the highest things that can be known." *Theoria* is said by Aristotle to be superior to all other forms of *energia* because "it is the most continuous" (2001, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.vii.1); that is, we can engage in it longer than we can carry on any other form of action. Additionally, *theoria* is thought to be the most pleasurable form of activity, since it alone is in accordance with wisdom or *sophia*, which is itself the highest virtue. It is for this reason that Aristotle claims that the life lived in pursuit of wisdom is the most pleasurable of lives.

The Pursuit of Wisdom as Immortalization and The Art of Dying

The ancients recognize contemplation not only as the highest form of *human* activity; it is also esteemed as an activity that actually transcends our strictly human or mortal nature. In their view, the mind engaged in *theoria* is itself imbued with the gift of participating in the divine nature such that it may be fully actualized as knower (*nous*) unified to what is known (*Nous*). That is, by engaging what is best

within ourselves in the search (*zetesis*) for what is truly best (i.e., the *Ariston*), wisdom's pursuit "immortalizes" us. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes:

> If then the intellect [*nous*] is something divine [*theion*] in comparison with the human [*ton anthropon*], so is the life [*bios*] of the intellect divine in comparison with human life. Nor ought we to obey those who enjoin that a human being should have human thoughts [*anthropina phronein*] and a mortal the thoughts of mortality [*ton thneton*], but we ought so far as possible to immortalize [*athanatizein*], and do all that human beings may to live in accordance with the highest thing [*to kratiston*] in ourselves; for though this be small in bulk, in power [*dynamei*] and honour [*timiotati*] it far surpasses all the rest. (2001, X.vii.8)

Aristotle's portrayal of *sophia*'s pursuit as immortalization is echoed throughout the world's wisdom traditions. For instance, Mircea Eliade (1958) discusses at length how both Samkyha dialectics and yogic practice, like Greek philosophy, involve immortalization and liberation (*moksa*) through wisdom (*prajna*). Similarly, Western wisdom literature too is rife with images of ascent which describe the activity of "immortalization" using the metaphor of the ladder (Bonaventure, 1956, Ch. 1 ff); Plato, 1961, *Symposium*, 209e-210e; St. John of the Cross, 2003, II.xv), whereby human beings contemplate the beauty they find in bodily or corporeal things, passing upwards to appreciate beauty found in souls, and next from souls to beautiful pursuits, from pursuits to studies, and from studies to contemplate Beauty itself. The loving search to know what is most beautiful (*kalotaton*) is the precise nature of wisdom's immortalizing pursuit.

But at the same time as the pursuit of wisdom is the practice of immortalizing, so too is it rightly called "the art of dying" in Plato's *Phaedo* (1961, 67e). For inasmuch as we seek to know what is best (*Ariston*) and most beautiful (*kalotaton*) – i.e., inasmuch as we "immortalize" -- we must necessarily also turn our attention away from all else, including our own selfish desires, our appetites and ambitions, our practical concerns – even from all the good things, good people, and good pursuits that, although they be good, are not the Good Itself. In the language of the wisdom traditions, we must die to ourselves and to all worldly concerns in order to cultivate the desire for what is highest: namely, wisdom. As Heraclitus tells us, "The way up and the way down are one and the same" (Robinson, 1933, p. 94). That is, wisdom's pursuit

is simultaneously an ascent (*anairesis*) towards immortalization, as well as a descent (*katabasis*) involving the death of the self to itself.

The Pursuit of Wisdom Requires Leisure (Schole)

In ancient thought, the quintessential activity of happiness – that is to say, contemplation, or *theoria* – is always associated with the exercise of our leisure. Rather than being identified with work, which always aims at the acquisition of goods beyond itself, the pursuit of wisdom is a free activity, and so undertaken for its own sake. To this day, the important relation between leisure and education is paid lip-service in our word "school," which has its etymological root in the Greek word for leisure (*schole*). Sadly, school as we know it today generally lacks any such atmosphere of *schole* in which we might engage in wisdom's pursuit through contemplation or *theoria*. Rather, students most commonly experience education in a school-based setting as "school-*work*"; that is, for them, school is equivalent with the daily toil of developing their powers of discursive reasoning. As school *workers*, their focus (and *ours* as teachers) is on deepening their critical, analytic, and calculative thought processes. As teachers, we mostly see it as our task to poke and to prod students in these modes of cognition; indeed, we are held to account by our provincial masters to test and to hone our students' abilities with discursive reasoning following Bloom's taxonomic learning objectives; briefly, we structure our lessons to cultivate student cognition beginning at the level of basic information accumulation and apprehension; we then push our students through various methods and exercises to transcend simple fact-gathering, and to move towards comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956, pp. 201-207).

However, our efforts as teachers with our students to hone these "thinking skills" and proficiencies in order to secure our global competitiveness would certainly be seen as largely one-sided against the rich backdrop of the great world traditions that have distinguished and articulated the rich and diverse powers or capacities of the mind or intellect; to the detriment of all else, we have cultivated the discursive and calculative intellectual capacity of the mind known as *ratio* in all of our academic pursuits with our students. The result has been that a very ancient – and in modern times, largely dismissed – capacity of the mind has been overlooked by our pragmatic pedagogical focus upon critical-analytic thought, testing, and assessment. Moreover, according

to all the ancient and medieval writers mentioned in this study, this overlooked capacity is arguably of a higher intellectual significance than the development of the *ratio* since it is most closely associated with the cultivation of human happiness. And what ought the purpose of education be if not to enable those who are educated to pursue happiness?

Latin authors refer to this power of the mind not as the *ratio*, but as the *intellectus*. "*Ratio*" designates the experience of the activity of reasoning, of analysing, synthesizing, and manipulating ideas in order to make sense of them. *Intellectus*, by contrast, designates a kind of non-linear cognition most akin to our experiences of "seeing," wherein the one who sees is unified with what is seen. Put another way, whereas reasoning (*ratio*) concerns the diverse, the mutable, and that which could be otherwise, *intellectus* concerns what always *is*, what is not diverse, what is immutable, and what is beyond the power of discursive thought, only being graspable by that part of a human being that is not strictly mortal but, according to ancient and medieval thinkers, participates in divinity. The exercise of *intellectus* is the highest activity for a human being. *Intellectus* allows us to know things at once or intuitively; it is a power of the mind whereby the knower grasps what is known without resort to discursive reasoning; it is for this reason termed a direct form of knowing; the modern-day contemplative education movement has attempted to distinguish it as a "third way of knowing" apart from the senses and critical reasoning (Hart, 2004, p. 29).

The Overshadowing of Noesis and Intellectus in Education

The Latin terms discussed above are not jargon, but rather indications of how careful ancient authors were in their attempts to differentiate thinking – to distinguish different sorts of experiences of thinking from one another according to their objects. Similar distinctions were made earlier by the Greeks in their use of the words *dianoia* and *noesis*. Indeed, the Latin counterpart to *dianoia* might roughly be understood as *ratio*, whereas the counterpart to *noesis* might be seen in *intellectus*. *Dianoia* is best rendered in English as "thought," whereas *noesis* is most often translated as "intellection." *Dianoia* includes geometric and deductive thinking; it involves the discovery and use of axioms and hypotheses without testing them, or "taking them up" (*anairesis*) towards their ultimate measure (*Metron*). *Dianoia* is the sort of thinking

that is most heavily cultivated in schools, and it is the focus of all our efforts in education reform, in assessment, and in measurement. *Noesis*, by contrast, involves the dialectical investigation of axioms and hypotheses. It is through *noesis* that we aspire to know the highest things, and it is this form of thinking that orders the *psyche*. *Noesis*, unlike *dianoia*, does not apply reasoning downward from the various principles (*archai*), but rather takes these *archai* themselves upward (*anairesis*); the various axioms and principles of the disciplines and fields of knowledge are themselves tested, questioned, and taken up dialectically towards their true beginning and source in the Divine *Arche*. Philosophic inquiry, or the pursuit of wisdom, takes *noesis* as its primary mode of cognition.

Having recovered in basic form the rich ancient understanding of cognition, we can now begin to see the deficiencies of our modern educational taxonomies. For instance, Bloom's conception of "evaluative" thinking – in his view, the highest form of cognitive activity – rests upon the learner acquiring facility in the assessment of what is thought over against what is given both in cultural *archai* or beliefs as well as in "the highest known standards" of the various arts and scientific disciplines and the "theories" that are built from them (1956, p. 207); however, when studied in light of ancient taxonomies, Bloom's evaluative thinking is really nothing more than the adept dianoetic machinations of the *ratio*. Entire vistas of human cognition are unaccounted for in his taxonomy, and are only awakened when we are engaged in wisdom's pursuit; indeed, the noetic operations of philosophy transcend all the *archai* ensconced in cultural beliefs and the standards of the various disciplines by its manner of questioning; whenever the cognitive activity of *noesis* is engaged – that is, whenever the mind reaches out for the ground of all its knowing and the source of all that is knowable – the axiomatic is itself judged dialectically according to its relation to the first beginning or *Arche*, which itself is grasped at the apex of noetic activity in the contemplative gaze (*theoria*). In this regard, Bloom's taxonomy is vastly deficient as a complete depiction of the full amplitude of the cognitive domain: it is wholly concerned with the *ratio* at the expense of of the *intellectus*; while accounting for the dianoetic elements of cognition, it lacks any concern with or recognition of the important role of *noesis* – the primary mode of pursuing wisdom.

The Need for Genuinely Transformational Reforms in Education

Ancient philosophy and the world's various wisdom traditions are quite clear that *sophia* is indeed the greatest good, and that *schole* and *theoria* are essential for all human beings who wish truly to receive any sort of "immortalizing" education aimed at genuine happiness. In our present-day educational reforms, we seem to have neglected the most basic insight of these traditions; namely, that we ought not to obey those "who enjoin that a human being should have human thoughts and a mortal the thoughts of mortality, but we ought so far as possible to immortalize (*athanatizein*)" (Aristotle, 2001, X.vii.8). Contrary to all the best advice of our ancient predecessors, our modern-day educational focus has been upon the strictly human and mortal; our efforts to improve the critical-analytic faculties through education have *not* been an education aimed at the pursuit of wisdom; consequently, the education we offer our students has *not* been aimed at directing them towards genuine happiness or *eudaimonia*. Education today with its emphasis on efficiency in work does not even rise above the strictly biological processes of nutrition, reproduction and self-preservation. The full amplitude of our human being is not explored by such an education. Students who are not encouraged to practice *schole* experience neither the ascent (*anairesis*) nor the descent (*katabasis*) that constitutes the pursuit of wisdom; lacking familiarity with wisdom's pursuit, neither do they experience the joy that Aristotle and others speak of that accompanies its cognitive movements. Students are not challenged to investigate the depths or the heights of things; they are not even given the opportunity to be made aware of these extremes without the proper wisdom atmosphere – without a recognition of the value of *schole*; rather, our current atmosphere serves, if anything, to stifle and to discourage any such awareness of the need to *athanatizein*.

Through developing some basic familiarity with ancient perspectives on wisdom, we can see just how neglected and undervalued wisdom has been, and remains, in today's educational institutions – even those like Alberta's which are lauded as being among "the best in the world" (Economist, 2006). In what follows, I have attempted to employ some of these ancient insights as a means of articulating the precise deficiencies of the Alberta government's 2010 education reform proposals. The most serious difficulty with the 2010 reforms is that they entirely overlook the importance of *schole*, of *theoria*, and the cultivation of the noetic movements of the *intellectus* that are necessary for the pursuit of

wisdom. Our present-day concerns in education – and those most keenly valued by our governments – are with practical matters and utility; that is, education is viewed as the primary mode of developing the power to acquire and maintain worldly goods; education is viewed as the most powerful mode to achieve our desires, whatever those desires may be; education is valued as a means to ensure the affluence and success that all parents wish for their children. These are the goals towards which all of our current educational efforts are directed; and we laud these goals *en masse* as being tied most closely to our hopes and dreams for our children and our future. However, as very many ancient philosophers and as the world's various wisdom traditions make clear, these goals, even if they are achieved, do not contribute to the cultivation of wisdom.

The 2010 "Inspiring Education" Report and the Pursuit of Wisdom

The importance of wisdom and the possibility of its pursuit is overlooked and perhaps even discouraged in the 2010 Steering Committee Report to the Minister of Education entitled, "Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans" (Government of Alberta, 2010). This document clearly illustrates not only the Government's but also the general public's lack of interest in – if not hostility to – pursuing wisdom; instead, it focuses even more stringently upon bolstering student achievements that correspond roughly to Bloom's taxonomic objectives as discussed earlier. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says that philosophy is precisely that "science which studies being as being" (2001, 1003a.20-21). However, rather than encouraging students and teachers to open themselves to the possibility of theoretic gazing upon the world as "being" (*to on*), this document is prefaced with a strange prophecy in which the real world – a world whose being is always available to us as human beings for contemplation – is to be presented to students rather as though it were a computer, or like a surface upon which computers might project information about the world. The Steering Committee Report begins as follows:

> *What is Ahead for Tomorrow's Learner?*
>
> Currently in development, a device called the "Sixth Sense" gives users information about any object in their immediate surroundings. It projects out information normally found on a computer, *in effect making the world a computer.*
>
> The Sixth Sense device is a wearable pendant that combines a mirror, a pocket projector, and a camera. Both the projector and the

> camera are connected to a cell phone in the user's pocket. *The device projects visual information on surfaces, walls and physical objects so that they become interfaces. ...*
>
> Imagine the possibilities for learners!
>
> [italics added], (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 3)

Rapt attention (*theoria*) to the world as it is given and as *being* – that is, direct, unmediated communion with a world that we have not created but into which we are born – is thereby deflected in favour of immersion in the transitory, fabricated stimuli and flickering images that are made available to us through technological innovations on the surface of things. In a subsequent reference to this brave, new world of learning in the 2030 classroom, the Report tells the story of a young girl named Chipo who has recently immigrated from Africa; she is depicted teaching her Albertan peers about her homeland solely with the aid of technological interfaces, and "a computer design program" with a "massive database" (p. 9). One of the most curious things about the Committee's "vision" of the 2030 classroom is that the teacher is *never* mentioned in this vignette. Indeed, heavy stress is placed upon the idea that the teacher must no longer be seen as an expert or "authority" in his or her field of study who shares his or her knowledge of this field with students; rather, the teacher must become "an architect of learning." In this regard, even the most basic meaning of the term "wisdom" carefully identified by many ancient writers (Aristotle, 2001; Plato, 1961; Maimonides, 1956; Aquinas, n.d.) as a kind of expert knowledge within a particular discipline is held in disrepute by the Committee Report.

The Report's stance on precisely what a teacher ought to know – that is, his or her modicum of "wisdom" or expertise in a given field of study – is ambiguous at best. On the one hand, it seems that educators must be deeply knowledgeable since "teachers must achieve excellence" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 7); additionally, public comments indicate a hope "that our educators are equipped with a knowledge that is as deep as it is broad" (p. 21). On the other hand, the claim seems to be that due to the pace of change and the sheer volume of things to know, teachers are not capable of being wise experts or "authorities" in their fields of study anymore. The Committee remarks that "today's pace of change is greater than at any other time in history" (p. 13), and in the future "the pace of change will be relentless and greater than we have ever experienced" (p. 4). Whereas a "single flow of information through an instructor" was "successful in educating past generations," the

Committee asks, "Will it be enough in a knowledge-based society?" (p. 11).

Indeed, the authors of the Report seem to render the most basic sense of wisdom as expertise superfluous in the 21st century classroom where technology may be introduced as a surrogate for the real, living knower – namely, the teacher – who might be an authority and competent guide in a given discipline or field of inquiry. The entire notion of wisdom as expert knowledge in a particular discipline or field of study seems to have become outmoded in the knowledge-based society in which, ironically, it is not important to know anything in particular; a real knowledge-based education is not about actually knowing anything specific, but rather knowing how to access information about the thing that you seek to know: "As we focus more on competencies, there will be less emphasis on knowing something, and more emphasis on knowing how to access information about it" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 25). From the perspective of the Committee, then, wisdom at the most basic level of competencies and skills in particular fields of study may be reducible to adept use of information technologies; the promotion of such *ersatz* wisdom consists in making access to those technologies as widespread as possible.

The entire notion of a wise teacher-expert is presented in the Report as outmoded due to what is seen as the increasingly rapid pace of change. The Committee remarks that a forward-thinking educational system must be responsive to this new reality: "In a system that is more learner-centred and competency-based, Albertans see the role of the teacher changing from that of a knowledge authority to an architect of learning" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 7; cf. 23). The place of wisdom in any given field of study is supplanted by technologies that provide all information about any given subject instantaneously or in real time – much as the example of Chipo cited above suggests. The teacher then seems to be relegated to the position of chaperone or facilitator for the transpiration of this technological process.

Although the teacher is no longer to be viewed as an authority in his or her subject area, the document strangely states that teachers may nonetheless "invite an expert in from the community to teach a class" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 23). Very little faith, indeed, seems to be placed in the knowledge base of teachers in Alberta. Perhaps that is why, when the Committee Report lists the participants in their "dialogue with Albertans," explicit mention is made of "parents and legal guardians," "community and not-for-profit/volunteer organizations,"

"educational stakeholders, including trustees," "educational organizations, including Aboriginal and Francophone," "students and youth," "post-secondary institutions," "business and industry," and even "the public at large," *no explicit mention of teachers as teachers is made anywhere* (p. 15).

At this point, we ought to question the appropriateness of the dismissal of the paradigmatic teacher as wise expert or authority. Indeed, it is a foundational principle of Western civilization that knowledge is something that is taught by one who knows to one who does not know – that one must, at a bare minimum, at least know something in order to be able to teach it to another. James Schall has written poignantly about the importance of knowledgeable teachers for student learning, and the joy that teachers take in passing on knowledge to their students (2001, pp. 15-27). In his view, the good teacher is irreplaceable and cannot simply be an "architect of learning," or one who sets students up for inquiry without having expertise in the area of inquiry under study; the teacher *must* be an authority; he or she *must* embody a degree of wisdom in regard to the discipline being taught.

Contrary to the suppositions of the Committee, the problems facing learners in today's fast-paced, knowledge-based society cannot be solved through greater integration of technology into the classroom by a teacher-architect as opposed to a wise or expert teacher with some authoritative knowledge in his or her discipline – even if this technology is "less" to "support teaching" and "more to support the creation and sharing of knowledge" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 22). Citing Thomas Aquinas as the main source for his own educational insights, Schall identifies three reasons why students often find it difficult to learn, even when they want to, and even with access to all the latest technological devices. The first is that there are so many disparate things to know and that there seems to be no order to hold them all together. "Seeing no order of learning, the beginner becomes confused and discouraged." The second reason is that learners in any given field of study very often are unable to see the internal order of that specific discipline. "In this case, one might understand the book or conversation but not how it relates to anything else." Aquinas refers to this key notion as *ordo disciplinae*, or the fact that "there is an order of subject and its parts, and of subjects themselves to one another." The third problem Schall notes that is encountered by the student wishing to learn is that being unable to see the *ordo disciplinae* generates what Aquinas calls *fastidium et confusionem*: that is, "loathing and confusion." Schall

remarks that "much of our difficulty in provoking students to learn ... arises precisely from the sense of loathing and confusion that naturally arises when they are confronted, as they usually are, with a mass of unrelated material" (2001, p. 23).

What greater "mass of unrelated material" is there than the World Wide Web? Aquinas' one thousand year-old remarks are particularly prescient of the difficulties facing students today who find themselves immersed in the modern technological classroom where, as the Report says, the pace of change is ostensibly "greater than at any other time in history," and where careful attention to one book with a knowledgeable teacher has been supplanted by instantaneous internet access to a multitude of disparate sources unfamiliar either to students or teachers. In such an environment of information overload, certainly not only students, but also the teacher who is *not* an authority in his or her respective field, would succumb to both *fastidium* and *confusionem*. As protection against this impediment to learning, the teacher must, therefore, be wise in the basic sense of knowing his or her discipline well. Schall writes:

> The teacher, the one who has learned himself, who knows his "science" or discipline explicitly, can by this very means better lead the student to knowledge than the student could lead himself. And Aquinas held that it is better to be able to teach or pass on things that we have contemplated, that we have delighted in knowing, than simply to know them by ourselves. (2001, p. 24)

In his emphasis on the teacher's knowledge of his or her subject, Schall points to an important element of teaching that is sidelined by the Report in its belief that a teacher's shortcomings in wisdom, exprtise, or authoritative knowledge can be overcome through technological innovations; namely, there is a *spiritual* component to teaching that marks it off especially as both an active and a contemplative enterprise. The spiritual basis for teaching is first *having seen the truth*! In this way, teaching at its root is necessarily a contemplative activity; neither student nor teacher can circumvent the need to contemplate or "to gaze upon" (*theorein*) what *is* (*to on*) by delivery through a technological apparatus. Technology does not theorize; unlike a teacher, it does not *see*, and it does not love the truth, take joy in the truth, or share the truth. On the day that governments hand over teaching to machines as a cost-cutting efficiency, teaching will no longer be teaching; for teaching is, and must remain, a spiritual activity.

Part of the reason why teachers teach is because they delight in *seeing* the truth, much as the act of contemplation is said by ancient authorities to be the most delightful of activities. If a teaching could be delivered without such a *seeing* on the part of the teacher, there would be no joy in it. And without the joy of *seeing* (*theoria*, the contemplative aspect of teaching), there would be no impetus for sharing the love *of* and the joy *in* the truth with one's neighbour – in this case, the student (the active aspect of teaching). Both elements of teaching must exist for learning to transpire in a genuine teacher-student relationship; no amount of technological innovation can alter this basic fact of existence.

Both Schall and Aquinas help us see that there is a necessary spiritual structure to teaching and learning. This means that education, contrary to what the Report says, cannot properly be "student-," "child-," or "learner-centred" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 6; cf. 7, 22); it must be *truth*-centred. Consequently, its centre must lie somewhere *between* the teacher and the learner. Without the teacher's learning, or without the teacher's *having seen* – if education could truly be "student-centred" as the Report suggests – there could not possibly be any teaching to pass on to the learner. There can be no genuine dialogue between teacher and student where the centre is not somewhere *between* the discussants – if *truth* rather than either of the participants is not the central concern of both parties. Just as the contemplative element of *seeing* – that immediate apprehension of the truth by the *intellectus* – in the expert learning or wisdom of the teacher *must* be present for the joyfulness of teaching to exist in the first place, so too would teaching cease properly to exist without its active component wherein this truth is passed joyfully from teacher to student.

The stress throughout the "Inspiring Education" document, however, is not on the joy of teaching and learning that accompanies the act of *seeing* (*theoria*), helping, or being helped to *see*, but rather on the alarm that Albertans ought to feel about the pace of change in a globalized world economy, the intensity of international competition for jobs and success, and worries about losing all that we have thus far acquired as Albertans, which is, in the Report, referred to as our "birthright" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 4):

> Will the child born this year have the skills necessary to both continue Alberta's legacy and strengthen it? Will this child be able to keep up with the pace of change? The answer, according to Albertans who contributed to the Inspiring Education dialogue is "probably not." Very few Albertans believe today's children are

> learning in a manner that responds to current or emerging realities. (p. 13)

As "the amount of available information continues to grow" in the new and global "knowledge-based economy," the Committee contends that

> Albertans will need to access, select and use information competently to make informed decisions. They will be increasingly challenged to determine the accuracy of the information at their fingertips. The creativity and innovation of its citizens will become Alberta's ultimate renewable resource. (p. 11)

Throughout the Report, special emphasis is placed upon efficient and competent use of information; that is, students must finish school being able to access information, sift through vast and ever-increasing volumes of information, make sense of this information, and judge information both for its credibility and its utility. Here, we see the Committee's concern with building "competencies" that correspond roughly to the "cognitive objectives" of Bloom's taxonomy as discussed earlier. Indeed, what constitutes a "knowledgeable" person in 2030 is stated in fairly straightforward Bloomian terms by the Committee as follows: "A person is considered knowledgeable if they can gather, analyze and synthesize information ... in order to create knowledge or find solutions to problems" (p. 25).

Using the philosophic language we have thus far developed to discuss different modes of cognition, we can clearly see that all emphasis in the Committee Report is on the cultivation of the dianoetic powers (as opposed to *noesis*) and the *ratio* (as opposed to the *intellectus*) for the purposes of dealing with rapid change competitively and innovatively. However, as we have seen both in cognitive taxonomies of the ancients and in the warnings of modern writers like Robert Sternberg, simply ratcheting up our intelligence quotients and honing our critical-analytic skills for the purposes of problem-solving and innovating will not suffice; on their own, such machinations *may* help us secure the means to the various ends we desire; but the movements of the *ratio*, no matter how adept, cannot tell us which innovations are good and which are not, nor can they tell us to what end we ought to innovate. Indeed, without also attending to and cultivating the noetic component of our rationality, we are left with only our own diverse passions and appetites as the means to make decisions about such things. This fact is particularly alarming in light of the Committee's praise for the confidence and boldness of the innovative future Albertan who, eschewing the need for all restraint in

the pursuit of one's passions and dreams, announces: "to hold back is to be held back" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 20).

Barry Cooper has written helpfully about these two aspects of "Western rationality" and their peculiar manner of embodiment in modern technological societies. Whereas we have thus far spoken of them using the Greek terms *dianoia* (thought) and *noesis* (intellection) on the one hand, and the Latin terms *ratio* (discursive reasoning) and *intellectus* (direct apprehension or understanding) on the other, Cooper speaks of "calculative, technical, or pragmatic reason" on the one hand, and "noetic reason" on the other:

> Technical-pragmatic reason guides rational action in the sciences of the external world of nature, in technological developments, and, in general, in the efficient and calculative coordination of means and ends. Noetic reason guides rational action in the sciences of human, society, and history, and in the formation or development of the psyche and of social order. Technical-pragmatic rationality is an absolute minimal requirement of the existence of a social or political order, however defective it might be by the criteria of noetic rationality. More specifically, *an ideological sectarian government that has effectively destroyed the public visibility of noetic reason is entirely capable of constructing an industrial, technological society.* On the other hand, a highly developed sense of noetic rationality within a community does not necessarily entail the growth of technological activity. The Soviet Union might serve as an example of the first kind of emphasis and the Athens of Plato the second. [italics added], (Cooper, 1991, pp. 68-69)

Professor Cooper's comments here speak of the Soviet Union as the most obvious and extreme case of the technological society in its lopsided penchant for technical-pragmatic reasoning. However, the writing in this passage is equally instructive in the Albertan example; we too must be careful not to destroy the "public visibility of noetic reason" in our own race towards the modern knowledge-based society. Cooper's discussion of the sidelining of noetic reason – *noesis* being, incidentally, the prime *modus operandi* of philosophy – ought to serve as a warning to us about our own provincial vision of education, particularly in its hypertrophied concern with "the pace of change" in transitory, man-made things on the one hand and its concomitant neglect of those unchanging elements of reality that are not the result of human effort and making on the other. Cooper is careful to point out that although these two facets of rationality – the technical and the noetic – may be spoken of as distinct from one another, it is incorrect to suppose that the

separation between them might be absolute; the realm of technical-pragmatic reason is in fact not autonomous. Cooper explains:

> Technical-pragmatic reason is part of human existence that, in turn, includes noetic reason. The claim to autonomy, which ... is a major assumption of technology, amounts to a desire to suppress noetic reason. But noetic reason is what orders the psyche; if it is suppressed, as we know from classical political philosophy, the soul becomes governed by the irrationality of the passions. Because noetic and technical-pragmatic reason are not autonomous, the efficiency of the latter, which coordinates ends and means, will invariably be impaired as the passions (or will) choose ends that cannot be realized, that are self-defeating, and so on. (1991, p. 69)

Cooper's assessment of the shortcomings of focusing solely upon technical-pragmatic reason are similar to the warnings of Sternberg about focusing on critical-analytic skills and competencies to the detriment of wisdom. Vamping up our achievement levels according to Bloom's taxonomic objectives is educationally insufficient, for without their grounding in noetic reason, the innovations of the 21st century learner in the modern technological, knowledge-based society will serve passions leading to unrealizable, self-defeating, and harmful ends.

The claim to autonomy in technical-pragmatic reasoning is alive and well in the Report's "transformational vision" of education as inspiring "innovation," and it can be seen most clearly in the Committee's impatience with what it considers to be "irrelevant" education. Indeed, the primary goal of the "vision" articulated in the province-wide dialogue with Albertans and espoused by the Committee is "innovation." The Committee calls the "vision" articulated in the Report "transformational" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 5; cf. 14), and it states that, "to truly transform education, the education system must empower innovation throughout the province" (p. 5). This focus on transformation through innovation especially underlies the document's concern to cultivate the "entrepreneurial spirit" – one of "the Three E's" of "education for the 21st Century" (p. 18) – for it is in the realm of work and business ventures that the real nature of the "transformation" sought by Albertans becomes clear. When asked "how educated Albertans would describe themselves in 2030," they respond with "I am resilient and adaptable, and have the ability and determination to *transform* my discoveries into products and services" [italics added] (p. 20). The "innovations" sought by such an education are, ultimately, in order to serve the diverse passions and desires of Albertans – whatever those passions might be –

and to secure access to those goods and services as the Albertan "birthright."

The transformational nature of the education envisioned in the Report is therefore concerned with future prosperity, competitiveness, and the ability to adapt to global marketplace forces. Because the pace of technological change is so rapid, the Report voices a certain impatience with any sort of education that might cause Albertans to lag internationally; education for 2030 therefore has no time for irrelevancies. In fact, the importance of relevance in education is stated frequently by the Committee in remarks like "the importance of *relevant* education increases as technologies develop and societal institutions experience the strain of rapid change" [italics added] (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 11). Relevance in education is explicitly linked in the Report to responsiveness and flexibility in dealing with societal change: "To ensure the learning opportunities are *relevant*, the education system must be nimble in responding to the changing needs of communities and the world" [italics added] (p. 32). However, the measure of "relevance" throughout this document appears to be the extent to which whatever is taught spurs Albertans to deal ever-more competently with "the pace of change"; such an education is "relevant" if it prepares "our children and youth for work," but it must also transcend this basic relevance by encouraging "learners to discover and pursue their passions" (p. 18) and to "achieve their highest potential" (p. 20). Education must, in short, enable Albertans to achieve the things that Albertans desire.

Education is largely instrumental in the Committee's transformational approach. It is not a liberal education; that is, education for 2030 is not an end in itself, but a means to the diverse ends that Albertans value. Indeed, the "new vision" articulated in "Inspiring Education" is said to "reflect Alberta values and aspirations" (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 14). Interestingly, elsewhere in the document, when discussing the "entrepreneurial spirit," the Albertan educated for 2030 is made to say: "I am **competitive** and ready to challenge the status quo" (p. 20 – boldface in original). It is doubtful, however, that what is meant here is *really* a challenge to the status quo since the document itself claims to be based upon and to reflect what it calls Albertan "values"; the entrepreneur's challenge is simply a manifest competitiveness that operates according to the rules accepted by the status quo. The entrepreneur abides in the status quo's acceptance of the importance of innovation in order to secure whatever goods and services the entrepreneur (in successfully harnessing market

demand) sees fit. Indeed, he cannot exist otherwise. Here, there is no sign of an *actual* quarrel with the contention that the "innovation" model of education offered as the status quo view of the majority of Albertans is itself open to question. That would, in fact, be a *philosophic* endeavour that would disrupt and jeopardize the fixation with innovation itself. The pursuit of wisdom, in this regard, does not readily find itself amenable to the pre-determined, government-imposed learning "outcomes" for which educators and the educational system must be held "accountable."

One who pursues wisdom might pose the following questions to Albertans and to the Committee: "What if what you desire is not really desirable, but you only suppose it is due to your ignorance? What if the most important things to be educated about are not those things which change but that which does not change? What if your 'potential' is not to be measured by successfully acquiring the disparate and mortal ends that you have chosen for yourself but by the degree to which you have attained your true potential through the immortalization of philosophizing? What if there are activities that are higher than work, yet also transcend your preferred 'passions' – that neither you nor your 'learners' have 'discovered' and 'pursued,' lacking as you do in any guidance about more profound passions that are 'irrelevant' to the program of innovation which you purvey? What if the point of education is not to speed everything up to remain competitive in the race for supremacy in the development, delivery, and maintenance of ever-changing goods and services, but rather to slow things down, to question, even to stop further 'progress' in that direction?"

Conclusion

In an atmosphere such as Alberta where heightened concerns for *accountability* to preconceived objectives or *learning outcomes* trump all other prerogatives, what room is there for the genuine pursuit of wisdom? Where concerns with accountability, relevance, and learning outcomes are coupled with a general distrust of teachers, how will a teacher's call for wisdom's pursuit resound? Will it not sound suspiciously like someone asking permission to behave irresponsibly, to isolate himself and to not be a team player? What effect does the aggressive demand for accountability have on noetic activities like philosophy, particularly when wisdom's pursuit cannot exist in an atmosphere of seriousness about the outcomes of our work and accountability, but rather only in an atmosphere of *schole* or leisure?

Indeed, do not all such aggressive demands for accountability in learning outcomes – experienced daily by teachers in Alberta, and not unlike those voiced in the Report – kill *schole*? Is not philosophy everyday forced, like Socrates, to drink hemlock in such an educational milieu?

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