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A Revaluation of Wisdom as a Way to Reconnect Philosophy with the Life-world

PETER JONKERS

Introduction

The observation – or complaint – that philosophy is out of touch with the life-world is, by itself, not new. Since the rise of modernity, philosophy has followed the paradigm of the sciences, and even claimed to offer an indubitable foundation to all scientific knowledge. Whereas ancient philosophy accepted the life-world as the domain of the unsettled, contingent, modern philosophy rejected this kind of knowledge as fundamentally unscientific. This approach not only resulted in a redefinition of the essence and task of philosophy, but also in an objectivistic restructuring of the life-world. However, especially since Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences* and Heidegger's writings there has been a growing awareness that the paradigm of scientific objectivism and philosophical foundationalism has had a reductionist effect on the life-world. This paradigm has actually functioned as a kind of Procrustean bed, chopping off all those aspects of the life-world that resist objectification, quantification, and representation, in particular the qualitative, emotive and valuing aspects of the life-world. Hence, it is no wonder that many contemporary philosophers interpret the impact of scientific objectivism and philosophical foundationalism on the life-world in terms of colonization (Habermas) and forgetfulness of being (Heidegger). Similarly, on a day-to-day level, ordinary people have the impression that science is unable to answer the pressing questions that arise from the life-world. To give only two examples: the inability of science to predict, let alone control the impact of its own offspring, namely technology, on the environment, and the fact that a lot of scientifically based solutions of all kinds of societal problems have created a host of new, unforeseen problems, have shocked people's trust in science.

The concept 'life-world' refers to various dimensions of human existence, such as: a pre-scientific experience of the natural world, the

historicity of human existence, kinesthetic corporeality etc.¹ In this paper, the focus will be on the life-world as the human's practical environment, shaped against the horizon of time and space, and in which people give meaning and orientation to their lives.² From this definition, it becomes clear that the mismatch between the this aspect of the life-world and the objectivism of modern science and the foundationalism of modern philosophy does not so much concern technical or factual issues, but has primarily to do with existential matters, which crop up when science tries to answer questions about the meaning of objective facts for human life. Especially, 'scientism', which was very influential during the first half of the twentieth century, is a case in point in this respect: it claimed that scientific rationality was able to solve all moral and existential questions of humankind, from how to define and evaluate social progress to offering a solution to the more fundamental problems of human freedom and destiny. Because, in the course of the twentieth century, it turned out that scientism has failed to live up to its claims, many people nowadays feel disappointed with science and scientific philosophy as such, and, on the rebound, are driven back on all kinds of unreflective convictions and attitudes when it comes to trying to answer existential questions. Therefore, paradoxically, the turn to scientific rationality, which characterizes modernity, has, in our times, led to the rise of all kinds of irrationalism when it comes to responding to the questions and challenges that arise from the life-world.

The leading question of this paper is how the rift between philosophy and the life-world can be bridged, thereby starting from the problems, with which philosophy is confronted once it has adopted the scientific paradigm and tries to answer existential questions from that perspective. The thesis of the German philosopher Hans Waldenfels deserves to be quoted in this respect: he is convinced that philosophy's loss of contact with the life-world, as well as its dwindling societal relevance has to do with its repression of the love

¹ Paul Janssen, "Lebenswelt," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, Band 5* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), p. 152.

² Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie, Husserliana, Band VI* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), pp. 314f.

of or the search for wisdom.³ Against this background, the thesis that I want to examine in the second part of this paper is whether a reevaluation of practical wisdom is able to retrieve philosophy's relation to the life-world. As will be argued in more detail below, practical wisdom can be defined as a life orientating kind of knowledge, which implies that it is closely related to the life-world. Yet insofar as it claims to give a *true* orientation to human lives, wisdom also needs to examine critically the presuppositions of the life-world in order to stave off the ideological distortions of this life-world. This aspect, in turn, links wisdom with philosophy.

In order to examine whether wisdom can serve as an intermediary between philosophy and the life-world, I start by analyzing, in the next section, why modern philosophy adopted the paradigm of scientific knowledge, and show how this development has affected the meaning of wisdom and had a ruinous effect on philosophy's relation with the life-world. In particular, I will criticize the fact that scientific rationality, because of its reductionist and objectivist character, has separated itself from the life-world. Furthermore, I will argue that philosophy can only relate positively to the life-world if it adopts the idea of reasonableness, which is a broader kind of rationality than the scientific one. In the section thereafter, I propose to return to philosophy's original self-definition, namely as the love of wisdom, and investigate whether the idea of practical wisdom can serve as an intermediate to reconnect philosophy with the life-world.

It has to be noted that this investigation will remain within the realm of Western philosophy, admittedly, the only one I am familiar with. Yet I think that a reevaluation of the idea of wisdom can help to bridge the disjunction between Western philosophy and other philosophical traditions, in particular Eastern ones, as well as between religious and secular traditions of wisdom.

A second preliminary remark concerns the philosophical nature of the investigation into the life-world. In fact, the relation between philosophy and the life-world confronts us with an important underlying problem, which will be a major point of attention throughout this paper. Fundamentally, philosophy's relationship with the life-world always has been and always will be an ambivalent

³ Hans Waldenfels, "Thesen zur Weisheit. Aus der Perspektive Asiens," *Philosophie und Weisheit* (Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989), p. 9.

one. If anything, the fierce debates between Socrates and the sophists have made clear that the godfather of the philosophers consistently tried to suspend the seeming wisdom of the sophists, which was actually nothing more than a justification of the existing order, by disqualifying it as mere opinion, unable to stand the test of critical examination.⁴ A similar ambivalence holds true for philosophy's relation with the life-world. The life-world can be defined as the cultural environment that is shaped by humans, and, therefore, is inevitably a mixture of appearance and reality. We should be mindful of the fact that philosophy turns into ideology, in the sense of a false consciousness, if it refrains from critically examining the life-world. Instead, it should keep in mind the Socratic motto, according to which only the *examined* life is worth living, which, by extension, means that one has also to examine the life-world.

The Rift between Modern Philosophy and the Life-world

Why has philosophy, since the beginning of modernity followed the paradigm of scientific knowledge, how has this affected its relation with the life-world, and what influence did this have on the definition of knowledge and wisdom? My reasons for asking these questions are not historical; rather, they are aimed at a better understanding of the roots of scientific rationality, expecting that this will enable us to find a way to retrieve philosophy's link with the life-world. In my historical sketch, I will mainly focus on the philosophy of Descartes, because his views are paradigmatic for the complex relation of the whole of modern philosophy with the life-world, as well as for the claim that science can provide true wisdom. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes writes that he was "delighted with the mathematics, on account of the certitude and evidence of its reasoning," while at the same time being utterly disappointed with the ancient moralists and masters of wisdom, who built "very towering and magnificent palaces with no better foundation than sand and mud."⁵ In order to solve this problem, Descartes takes the fundamental decision, with far-reaching consequences, to expand the mathematical method to all other

⁴ Günther Bien, "Einige Bemerkungen zum Verhältnis von Philosophie, Wissenschaft und Weisheit," *Philosophie und Weisheit*, p. 39.

⁵ René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes. Tome VI: Discours de la méthode* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), p. 8.

disciplines (an approach called 'mathesis universalis'). This leads, first, to a redefinition of philosophy as foundational and scientific, because it rests on an indubitable foundation, thus serving as the groundwork of all (other) sciences, and because it is able to produce a knowledge that has the same degree of certitude and clarity as mathematics.

Descartes also redefines the word wisdom and identifies it with scientific knowledge: from now on,

by wisdom is to be understood not merely prudence in the management of affairs, but a perfect knowledge of all that man can know, as well for the conduct of his life as for the preservation of his health and the discovery of all the arts, and that knowledge to serve these ends must necessarily be deduced from first causes.⁶

Therefore, if one wants to reach the highest degree of wisdom, one needs, first of all, a perfect knowledge of all things, and this can only be obtained if one starts from the principles, taking into consideration that they "are very clear, and [...] that we can deduce all other truths from them."⁷

This shows how the Cartesian method of the *mathesis universalis* has affected the very nature of philosophy: it becomes truly scientific and foundational, because it rests on a limited number of absolutely clear and certain principles or axioms, from which all other truths, including those of the other sciences and morality, can be deduced. Descartes compares his idea of philosophy with

a tree, of which metaphysics is the root, physics the trunk, and all the other sciences the branches that grow out of this trunk, which are reduced to three principal, namely, medicine, mechanics, and ethics. By the science of morals, I understand the highest and most perfect which, presupposing an entire knowledge of the other sciences, is the last degree of wisdom.⁸

⁶ René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes. Tome IX/2: Principes de la philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), p. 2.

⁷ Descartes, *Principes de la philosophie*, p. 9.

⁸ Descartes, *Principes de la philosophie*, p. 14.

The above shows, first, that Descartes follows the Aristotelian line of thought, according to which theoretical philosophy is true wisdom, in particular the scientific knowledge of the first causes and principles of things.⁹ Descartes thereby disregards Plato's distinction between the perfect knowledge of the Gods, who possess true wisdom and, hence, do not have to philosophize, and the imperfectness of human knowledge, implying that humans are always striving for wisdom.¹⁰ Second, Descartes' comparison of the whole of philosophy with a tree shows that practical wisdom is a derivative of theoretical wisdom or scientific knowledge. Hence, scientific knowledge not only becomes paradigmatic for the way in which we should understand the life-world, but also for living in it. Descartes thereby not only overlooks Aristotle's distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom, but also ignores the latter's notion of prudence, being the instrument of practical wisdom.¹¹ In sum, the ultimate goal of the Cartesian project is to upgrade practical to theoretical wisdom, i.e. to a form of scientific knowledge, built on metaphysics and (mathematical) physics. But in order to guarantee that such a practical, yet scientific wisdom can be applied at all to the life-world, the latter has to be shaped in complete accordance with the ideal of scientific knowledge as well. This results in a reduction of the natural world to merely 'res extensa', and of human emotions, behaviors, relations, etc. to something purely physical. Hence, for Descartes, the highest moral good and the scientifically true eventually coincide. In line with the general enthusiasm of those times about the success of mathematical physics and its applicability to all other fields of knowledge, he considers this so-called definitive science of morals, which is, indeed, scientific in the strict, above analyzed sense of the word, within reach.

But Descartes realizes that such a definitive morality is not yet available for the time being. Nevertheless, "since in action it frequently happens that no delay is permissible, it is very certain that, when it is not in our power to determine what is true, we ought to act according to what is most probable."¹² Hence, as long as scientific philosophy is unable to fulfill its promise of a definitive science of

⁹ Aristoteles, *Metaphysica* I, 1, 982a; Idem, *Ethica Nicomachea* VI, 7, 1141a.

¹⁰ Plato, *Symposium* 204a f.; Idem, *Phaedrus* 278d.

¹¹ Aristoteles, *Metaphysica* I, 1, 981b f.; Idem, *Ethica Nicomachea* VI, 5-7, 1140a-1141b.

¹² Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, p. 25.

morals, Descartes accepts that there has to be made, in real life, a distinction between the true, which is indubitably certain, and the good, which is only more or less probable. Therefore, as he writes in his *Discourse*,

I formed a provisory code of morals, composed of three or four maxims, [...] so that I might not remain irresolute in my actions, while my reason compelled me to suspend my judgment, and that I might not be prevented from living thenceforward in the greatest possible felicity.¹³

These maxims reflect a high degree of prudence and traditional, practical wisdom. This means that they lack the indubitable and absolutely clear foundation of the first principles, which characterizes the definitive science of morals. Nevertheless, these maxims are absolutely necessary if humans want to live in felicity. They comprise

to obey the laws and customs of my country, adhering firmly to the faith in which [...] I had been educated from my childhood and regulating my conduct in every other matter according to the most moderate opinions, and the farthest removed from extremes; [...] to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I was able, and not to adhere less steadfastly to the most doubtful opinions, when once adopted, than if they had been highly certain; [...] to endeavor always to conquer myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world.¹⁴

In the course of the history of modern philosophy, the paradigmatic character of the Cartesian program to identify philosophy with scientific knowledge, thereby reducing the life-world to what is intuitively or demonstratively certain, and to see wisdom as the fruit of this kind of knowledge has become apparent in many ways. Examples of this approach are Leibniz' definition of wisdom as "a perfect science of all those things that are in the reach of the human

¹³ Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, pp. 22-25.

heart,"¹⁵ Fichte's project to replace philosophy as the love of wisdom by the doctrine of science,¹⁶ as well as Hegel's programmatic statement in the *Preface* of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "To help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title 'love of knowing' and be *actual* knowing – that is what I have set myself to do."¹⁷ In twentieth century philosophy, this paradigm also resonates in the term 'scientific worldview', which was the catchword of the Vienna Circle and of the official Marxist-Leninist state doctrine in the Soviet Union.

In the above, I have shown that the relation between modern, foundational philosophy and the life-world is a multifaceted one. First, the analysis of Descartes' philosophical project has made clear that the radical disconnection of philosophy from the life-world was, in his view, a necessary, preparatory step to put a radical end to all forms of false life orientations or seeming wisdom. He was convinced that, after this preparation, philosophy could be connected with the life-world again on a more solid, in particular mathematical foundation. In my opinion, the fundamental reasons of this strategy are still valid today, although its concrete development is highly problematic. Above, the life-world was defined as the practical, cultural environment in which humans act, and which is situated against a temporal and spatial horizon. Inevitably, the life-world and the variety of narratives underpinning it are a mix of truth and falsehood, appearance and reality, truthful life orientations and ideological distortions. It is an essential task for philosophy to examine the life-world critically, especially in times of upheaval, and to purify it, if need be. This is also true for what presents itself as wisdom, because, from time to time, it turns out to be self-conceit and leading to a false consciousness. Therefore, against all odds, Descartes'

¹⁵ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Von Glückseligkeit," *Philosophische Schriften, Band VI:3* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1980), pp. 645f. It deserves to be noted that, in this text, Leibniz refers approvingly to Descartes' comparison of wisdom with the fruits of the tree of philosophy.

¹⁶ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder der sogenannten Philosophie," *Werke, Band 1: Zur theoretischen Philosophie I* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), pp. 38f.

¹⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke, Band 9: Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1980), p. 11.

real aim was not to disconnect philosophy from the life-world once and for all, but instead to reconnect them in a more truthful way.

But, second, the concrete approach and content of the Cartesian project also led to a reductionism with regard to the life-world, and brought about philosophy's estrangement from it. In particular, Descartes' attempt to base human's relation with the life-world on an indubitable, unshakable foundation actually resulted in the 'scientification' and objectification of the life-world. However, this is completely at odds with its cultural and historical nature, as well as with the fundamental subjectivity and historicity of human existence. Against this background, it is no wonder that science has proven unable to serve as a beacon in human's quest for orientation in the life-world, and to answer the question of the moral and existential meaning of the results of scientific inquiry. The reason for this is that the enormous benefits of science, viz. its exactness and certainty, and, above all, its link with technology goes at the cost of radically abstracting from the inexhaustible richness of the life-world.

Again, Descartes gives an intriguing example of the consequences of the scientification and objectification of the life-world. Impressed by the discovery of the blood circulation, in 1628, by William Harvey, he redefines the human body in purely mechanical terms, and compares the heart with a pump.¹⁸ Although many of his views about the functioning of the body are outmoded, his mechanistic approach of the human body is still paradigmatic for contemporary medical science and its reductionist relation to the lived body. But, because the lived body is our prime access to the life-world, the scientific and objectivistic approach of the body works counterproductive. The effects of cardiac arrhythmia on the life quality of the human person go far beyond the objective fact that a pump in the human body is malfunctioning. From a phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty has shown that the Cartesian, objectivistic approach of the body is unable to explain the experience of our own body, which characterizes the way in which we relate to the life-world:

The experience of our own body [...] reveals to us an ambiguous mode of existing. If I try to think of it as a cluster of third person processes – 'sight', 'motility', 'sexuality' – I observe that these

¹⁸ Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, pp. 46f.

‘functions’ cannot be interrelated and related to the external world, by causal connections, they are all obscurely drawn together and mutually implied in a unique drama. Therefore, the body is not an object. [...] Whether it is a question of another’s body or my own, I have no means of knowing the human body other than of *living* it.¹⁹

This critique of scientific objectivism and reductionism should not be misunderstood as a plea to return to pre-scientific irrationalism, but is meant to highlight the problematic consequences of (scientific) rationalism and objectivism, which have become paradigmatic for the interpretation of the life-world. Interpreting the life-world requires a broader, more encompassing kind of rationality, which is in accordance with the encompassing character of the life-world itself. What is at stake here is the difference between ‘understanding’, which is characteristic of the scientific approach of reality, and ‘reason’, which characterizes the encompassing rationality that inheres, among others, the life-world. Building on the origins of this distinction in the philosophies of Kant and Hegel one can say that reason is capable of producing “a self-subsistent unity, in which [...] every member exists for every other, and all for the sake of each, so that no principle can safely be taken in *any one* relation, unless it has been investigated in the *entirety* of its relations to the whole employment of pure reason.”²⁰ In Hegel’s philosophy, this unifying and integrating function of reason is extended to all domains of being. Whereas he defines understanding as “the capacity to set limits”²¹ and hence to produce all kinds of dichotomies, “the sole interest of reason is to suspend such rigid antitheses.”²² Obviously, it was not Hegel’s intention to play off reason and understanding against each other: on the contrary, in order

¹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 231 (italics mine).

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Werke in zehn Bänden. Band 4: Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), p. B XXIII. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is quoted according to the pagination of the second edition (=B) of 1787.

²¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie,” *Gesammelte Werke, Band 4: Jenaer kritische Schriften* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968), p. 12.

²² Hegel, “Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie,” p. 13.

to avoid a kind of vague, undifferentiated knowledge or to remain entangled in the irrationality of immediate intuitions and edifying talk it is essential to start with the definitions and distinctions of understanding.²³ However, in order to understand the life-world, the restricted rationality of the scientific worldview needs to be superseded in reason, which is capable to grasp the interconnected character of the life-world and the complex relations of humans with it. In sum, philosophy can only reconnect with the life-world through reason. This implies a critique, from the perspective of such a more encompassing form of rationality, of reductionist rationalism and objectivism, which is characteristic of the way in which science and foundational philosophy approach the life-world.

Practical Wisdom as a Way to Reconnect Philosophy with the Life-world

The main results of the previous section are that philosophy has an essential critical role to play with regard to the life-world, while at the same time it has become clear that modern, scientific philosophy has been unable to relate to the life-world in a fruitful way. On this basis, I want to explore in this section whether an interpretation of philosophy as *a reasonable quest for practical wisdom* can serve as an intermediate to reconnect philosophy with the life-world.

As a start, let us return to Plato's characterization of philosophy as the love of wisdom, thereby distinguishing it clearly from the divine knowledge of the Gods, the only ones who are truly wise. As noted above, Aristotle differentiates the Platonic idea of wisdom by making a distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom: theoretical wisdom deals with investigating the first principles and causes, whereas practical wisdom is about human acting.²⁴ But in order to give a proper orientation to human acting, practical wisdom has to combine a practical knowhow of the contingencies of the life-world with a theoretical, reasonable insight in and a critical examination of the true nature of the good in general. Precisely because of this combination, the Aristotelian idea of practical wisdom is to be

²³ I developed this idea further in Peter Jonkers, "Redefining Religious Truth as a Challenge for Philosophy of Religion," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 4 (2012), pp. 139-159.

²⁴ Aristoteles, *Metaphysica*, 982b, 5-10.

preferred over Descartes' scientific and objectivistic approach of the life-world, because the latter tends to ignore the inevitable contingent and contextual character of the life-world. Contemporary philosophers, too, highlight the dual character of practical wisdom: it is not simply knowing how to steer one's way through life, cope with difficulties etc. in order to become happy,²⁵ but also involves a reasonable insight and a critical appreciation of the deepest significance of whatever occurs.²⁶ This shows that practical wisdom can indeed serve as an intermediate between the life-world and philosophy: it is related to the life-world, because it orientates the lives of people towards the good life; it is also related to philosophy, because the latter critically examines whether the final goal of what presents itself as wisdom is indeed the good life.

However, the relation between philosophy and practical wisdom is also an ambivalent one. In order to elucidate this, I want to analyze Kant's views on this matter. He combines the Platonic line of thought, defining philosophy as (love of) wisdom and the Aristotelian idea of theoretical philosophy as the (love of) science.²⁷ In his *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant suggests to return to the ancient definition of philosophy as a doctrine of wisdom, in particular as

an instruction in the conception in which the highest good was to be placed, and the conduct by which it was to be obtained. It would be well to leave this word [i.e. philosophy] its ancient signification as a doctrine of the highest good, so far as reason endeavours to make this into a science. For on the one hand, the restriction annexed would suit the Greek expression (which signifies the love of wisdom), and yet at the same time would be sufficient to embrace under the name of philosophy the love of science.²⁸

²⁵ For the importance of the link between wisdom and human flourishing see Odo Marquard, "Drei Betrachtungen zum Thema 'Philosophie und Weisheit'," *Philosophie und Weisheit*, pp. 280-282.

²⁶ Robert Nozick, "What is Wisdom and Why do Philosophers Love it so?," *The Examined Life. Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1989), p. 275.

²⁷ Bien, "Einige Bemerkungen zum Verhältnis von Philosophie, Wissenschaft und Weisheit," p. 49.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, "Kritik der praktischen Vernunft," *Werke in zehn Bänden. Band 6: Schriften zur Ethik und Religionsphilosophie: Erster Teil* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), p. 236.

So, wisdom rests on an idea of the highest good, and orientates human conduct towards obtaining it, thus showing that wisdom is closely related to the life-world. But in order to prevent wisdom from producing sophisms, a philosophical doctrine of the highest good is needed, which serves as the narrow gate, through which one has to pass in order to attain true wisdom. In order to emphasize the systematic character of a philosophical critique of wisdom, Kant calls it a science; it is the only instrument at our disposal to distinguish true wisdom from what he calls fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*), superstition, and other kinds of immediate revelations of presumed wisdom. What appears to be wisdom does not always orientate people to the highest good, but may lead them astray. Therefore, every claim to wisdom has to be examined critically by philosophy. In particular, Kant disqualifies those, who want to pass their immediate infusions off as pearls of wisdom, but repudiate scientific scrutiny of them, as misologists. It has to be avoided at all costs that these people dominate the philosophical and, even more importantly, the public debate.²⁹

But at the same time it is clear that, especially in his later works,³⁰ Kant does not put science on a par with wisdom. Rather, he points out that philosophy has an instrumental relation with regard to wisdom, being philosophy's final goal:

Its [i.e. philosophy's] sole preoccupation is wisdom; and it seeks it by the path of science, which, once it has been trodden, can never be overgrown, and permits of no wandering. Mathematics, natural science, even our empirical knowledge, have a high value as means, for the most part, to contingent ends, but also, in the ultimate outcome, to ends that are necessary and essential to humanity.³¹

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, "Logik," *Werke in zehn Bänden. Band 5: Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), p. 449.

³⁰ See Marquard, "Drei Betrachtungen zum Thema 'Philosophie und Weisheit'," p. 277.

³¹ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 878. See also the conclusion of Kant, "Kritik der praktischen Vernunft," p. 302: "Science (critically undertaken and methodically directed) is the narrow gate that leads to the true doctrine of

In contrast to Descartes, who was convinced that scientific philosophy could directly bear the fruits of wisdom, Kant is far more modest in this respect. In his view,

philosophy as well as wisdom would always remain an ideal, which objectively is presented complete in reason alone, while subjectively for the person it is only the goal of his unceasing endeavours; and no one would be justified in professing to be in possession of it so as to assume the name of philosopher who could not also show its infallible effects in his own person as an example.³²

Kant's reserve with regard to philosophy's capacity to positively produce wisdom is a consequence of the critical nature of his thinking. The role of philosophy (or science) with regard to wisdom is, in the first place, a negative one: it has to curb the overblown pretensions of human reason, which is by its very nature dialectical. In particular, science "prevents the devastations of which a lawless speculative reason would otherwise quite inevitably be guilty in the field of morals as well as in that of religion."³³ In other words, science only serves as a means, a path, a narrow gate, an organon for wisdom, but does not coincide with wisdom itself. This shows that Kant is aware of the gap that separates (scientific) philosophy from wisdom, and hence, avoids a reduction of wisdom to scientific knowledge. But, secondly, philosophy also has a positive role to play with regard to wisdom, although, admittedly, a modest one. Insofar as it is a systematic doctrine of the highest good, philosophy can only make hypothetical propositions concerning the idea of the highest good, since it belongs to the noumenal sphere, and therefore surpasses the

practical wisdom [...]. Philosophy must always continue to be the guardian of this science; and although the public does not take any interest in its subtle investigations, it must take an interest in the resulting doctrines, which such an examination first puts in a clear light." See also: Kant, "Logik," p. 449: "For science is of an intrinsic value as an organon of wisdom only. But, as such, it is indispensable to it; so that it may well be maintained that wisdom without science is a shadow of a perfection which we never shall reach."

³² Kant, "Kritik der praktischen Vernunft," p. 236.

³³ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, p. B 877.

reach of human understanding. Hence, human reason cannot positively know the highest good, thereby implying that wisdom, indeed, always remains an ideal. But as an ideal of practical wisdom, the highest good has an “excellent, and indeed indispensably necessary regulative employment,”³⁴ since it orientates us in all our moral actions.³⁵ In sum, through its negative and positive role with regard to wisdom, philosophy connects itself with the life-world.

Kant’s nuanced position with regard to the complex relation between philosophy, wisdom, and the life-world needs to be made more concrete. First of all, philosophy is not itself a form of wisdom, but rather a *doctrine* of wisdom, whose task is to give a critical, theoretical account of the highest good, which is imperative in order to prevent its ideological distortion. But, as Kant pointed out, wisdom is more than possessing the idea of the highest good and conveying it to others, it also comprises the ability of orientating one’s own or somebody else’s concrete conduct towards it. This dimension of wisdom requires another task from philosophy as a doctrine of wisdom, namely to give a theoretical reflection on the idea of moral orientation.

In order to elucidate this last aspect, I will give a short comment on a text of Kant, in which he explicitly addresses this issue, viz. *What Does It Mean: to Orientate Oneself In Thinking?*³⁶ In the previous section, wisdom has been defined as an orienting kind of knowledge for humans in the life-world, specifically in practical matters. Well, every kind of orientation requires a subjective principle. To take an example from another part of the life-world: if one wants to orientate oneself geographically, the awareness of the difference between one’s left and right hand is essential. By analogy, to orientate oneself with regard to another aspect of the life-world, namely in moral matters or, as Kant calls it, in thinking, means “to be guided, in one’s conviction of truth, by a subjective principle of reason where objective principles of reason are inadequate.”³⁷ The term ‘subjective’ does not mean that such a principle is nothing but the expression of a private whim, but refers to

³⁴ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, p. B 672.

³⁵ Kant, “Kritik der praktischen Vernunft,” p. 256; Immanuel Kant, “Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren?” *Werke in zehn Bänden. Band 5: Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik*, pp. 271-274.

³⁶ Kant, “Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren?,” pp. 267-283.

³⁷ Kant, “Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren?,” p. 270, footnote.

a need of practical reason to make the highest good to the object of my will.³⁸ This principle is necessary when it comes to orientating ourselves in existential or moral situations, because we feel on the one hand an urgent (subjective) need to pass a true judgment about our life-orientations, while on the other we are painfully aware of the lack of objective knowledge that would make such a judgment univocally and universally true. In other words, to orientate oneself in the life-world is neither a matter of just doing whatever come to one's mind, nor of scientific knowledge.

Furthermore, insofar as wisdom is a specific kind of orientation, this analysis also shows that wisdom is, indeed, an intermediate between philosophy and the life-world. The subjective character of the principle for orientation means that practical wisdom always has to take into account the specific situation of persons and communities in the life-world, implying that their ways of acting on the basis of the principle of the highest good is always dependent on their individuality. That is why wisdom always requires deliberation, and, hence, cannot be superseded in science or scientific philosophy. But in order to offer a truthful orientation in the life-world, wisdom also needs to be based on a critical examination of what presents itself as such. This is the essential role of philosophy: it cannot claim to define positively what wisdom is and even less produce immediate wise insights, but, as the doctrine of wisdom, has merely a negative role as the narrow gate through which all insights have to pass in order to qualify as true wisdom.

A Contemporary View on Practical Wisdom

On the basis of the analysis of Kant's views about the relation between philosophy and wisdom, I will examine the idea of practical wisdom and its relation to the life-world. In our times, we see that practical wisdom is needed more than ever, because people have come to realize that, in spite of the enormous growth of scientific knowledge and technical knowhow, not much progress has been made in solving the existential conflicts that predominate the life-world. These conflicts result from the confrontation between the one-sidedness of moral principles and another one-sidedness, namely that of the

³⁸ Kant, "Kritik der praktischen Vernunft," pp. 256, 276.

contextual and complex nature of human lives.³⁹ This causes the tragic character of human existence.

Against this background, the task of practical wisdom is precisely to overcome human tragedy by making the transition from insight in and a critical examination of the true nature of the good life with and for others to the concrete condition of individual and collective human lives. This means that someone who has a vast knowledge about moral principles, but is unable to relate these appropriately to the complexities of concrete human lives, would not be termed wise, but makes himself guilty of a hubris of practical reason. Similarly, someone who is sensitive to the complexities of people's concrete situations without taking into account the importance of moral principles as objective standards of the good life, yields to the illusions of the heart, and would not be considered wise either.⁴⁰

Hence, the essence of practical wisdom is to respond to the above existential conflicts by giving a moral or existential judgment in the context of the life-world. Such a judgment holds at bay the ruinous alternatives of focusing only on the universality of moral principles, leading to the illusion of the univocity of these principles, as well as on the historical contexts of the life-world, which leads to arbitrariness.⁴¹ Only through a moral judgment in the context of the life-world can practical wisdom reach its final goal, namely to assist people in their search for a truthful orientation of their lives. However, this does not mean that practical wisdom would be able to put an end to these existential conflicts once and for all, because they result from the conflicting nature of human existence itself.⁴²

³⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), pp. 318f.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 281. In this context, it deserves to be noted that several authors deplore the fact that, since modernity, the tension between theoretical, detached knowledge and life-oriented, engaged love of wisdom has widened to a complete rift, which has obviously gone at the cost of the more holistic idea of knowledge. See: Nozick, "What is Wisdom?," p. 273; Brenda Almond, "Seeking Wisdom. Moral Wisdom or Ethical Expertise," *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, pp. 202-205; Daniel Kaufman, "Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Philosopher," *Philosophy* 81, 1 (2006), pp. 129-151.

⁴¹ Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 291.

⁴² Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 291. In this study, Ricoeur gives several examples of these conflicts between general principles and contextual situations of human lives, which all come down to the problem of how to apply a general rule in a plurality of concrete, existential contexts. The essential task of practical

The capacity to deliberate is essential for practical wisdom, precisely because it aims at a moral judgement in a concrete life-world situation. To phrase it in Aristotelian terms, the objects of practical wisdom are – unlike those of theoretical wisdom – the things that are not of necessity and, hence, are capable of being otherwise. Practical wisdom starts from an examination of the general principles of the good life and connects them with the particularity and plurality of the life-world. Just implementing universal principles and propositions concerning the good life in the life-world is anything but wise, because such a way of doing yields to the illusion that these principles can univocally be applied to the contextual realities of the life-world. Instead, practical wisdom has to be based on a refined deliberation, aimed at a careful assessment of these contextual realities in the light of general principles.⁴³ This explains Nozick's remark that the notion of wisdom always has to take into account the constraints of feasibility, that is, the negative aspects of the best alternative, the value of the next best alternative, and the limits on possibility themselves, which exclude certain alternatives as feasible objects of choice. Furthermore, a wise judgement has to incorporate and balance each of the partial evaluative factors thought relevant.⁴⁴ But it is equally essential not to reduce wisdom to a kind of practical knowhow or to drawing up an inventory of the contingencies and pluralities of human life, since practical wisdom also involves a fundamental reflection on the true nature of the good.⁴⁵

In my view, the main reason that many traditional as well as contemporary views on practical wisdom are so problematic is that they actually negate the transitional character of wisdom's moral judgments in the context of the life-world. Most traditional forms of wisdom are rather theoretical, focused on the universal principles of the good life, thereby raising themselves above human passions and the complexities of his existence. Wisdom thus seems to be something

wisdom, in this respect, is to mediate this antinomy by a situational judgment. See Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, pp. 291ff.

⁴³ Wolfgang Welsch, "Weisheit in einer Welt der Pluralität," *Philosophie und Weisheit*, pp. 241ff.

⁴⁴ Nozick, "What is Wisdom?," pp. 270f; 277f.

⁴⁵ Sharon Ryan, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," *Acta Analytica* (2012) 27, p. 103.

which is imposed on the world from above it.⁴⁶ But in this way, these traditions give the impression that wisdom is a simple univocal affair, so that it risks to become severed from the concrete lives of people.⁴⁷ Contemporary manifestations of wisdom, by contrast, focus on the spatio-temporal settings of human lives, thereby failing to critically examine the hidden assumptions of these settings, in particular the need to relate them to universal moral principles. Consequently, such a kind of presumed wisdom risks to be nothing more than an ideological justification of the existing order.⁴⁸ It is clear that neither of these two views on practical wisdom is able to truly orient human lives; the popularity of these approaches, then and now, probably stems from the fact that they give us the illusion of being able to find a definitive solution, albeit in opposite ways, to the existential conflicts that haunt us, and thus create the erroneous impression that either one of these approaches can make human life easy. But by doing so they negate the very nature of practical wisdom, which consists in the fragile nature of every judgment in situation.

Conclusion

In sum, what is the answer to the leading question of this paper, namely to bridge the rift between philosophy and the life-world and what role can practical wisdom play in this respect? In the preceding sections, I have argued that philosophy has unintentionally separated itself from the life-world ever since it has adopted the paradigm of modern science. Although philosophy wanted to put a final end to all unfounded kinds of orientation in the life-world, and claimed to be able to give a univocal orientation to people's lives on a solid base, its objectivism in fact resulted in philosophy's estrangement from the life-world. More in general, the objectivism of science and the philosophies based on it are responsible for the fact that many people turn their back to the scientific worldview and erroneously think that unreflective ideas and immediate emotions could orient their lives. Against this background, I developed the thesis that practical wisdom is an intermediate between philosophy and the life-world, and, hence,

⁴⁶ Robert Song, "Wisdom as the End of Morality," *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, pp. 299-302.

⁴⁷ Welsch, „Weisheit in einer Welt der Pluralität," p. 227.

⁴⁸ Almond, "Seeking Wisdom," p. 199.

can bridge the gap between them. This is so, because practical wisdom starts from a critical, philosophical examination of the general principles, which are meant to orient human lives, and makes, from there, the transition to the contingency of the life-world. In order to realize this transition, deliberation is essential, which means that the connection of philosophy and the life-world is inevitable a fragile one.

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