The
Book
of
Models

*… we shape or reshape our reality as rehearsal propels our
chosen texts from being mere models towards becoming our
actuality*

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Closure

A response to Miroslav Holub

John Monk

My first thought in working out a response to Miroslav Holub's essay was that in my professional domain of engineering I cannot recall seeing or hearing the word 'wisdom' being used. It was a reminder that in our use of language there are what mathematicians might call closures; there are domains of discourse that are sustained by a limited vocabulary. These closures manifest themselves in texts that form genres with each genre identified by its own characteristic use of language, and within a particular situations where people talk and write using a limited grammar and vocabulary. Using Wittgenstein's term, people engage in language games and the games they participate in are governed partly by their surroundings and their companions (Wittgenstein 1988 pp.29–32e §60–66).

Engineers, for example, when they are in a professional context might be expected to encompass what we call logic as a part of the framework for their writing and their speech (Heath 1998), and in their professional publications they would also exclude most references to people, except as the constituents of technical categories such as users, drivers or operators. People are transformed into role players and lose their individuality. From within the genre of engineering there is no clear way to criticise this transformation of individuals so there is no call from within the profession for change. The

closure provides a guarantee of its own stability since people, and their institutions, are, in Miroslav Holub's words, 'Bound by the hempen fetters of speech' (See Chapter 9, page 182).

A closure is vulnerable to criticism from without. For example a lack of attention to individuals by engineers would be vulnerable to criticism from students of the novel but since these criticisms are expressed in terms that are outside the engineers' linguistic closure they are not necessarily treated as legitimate expressions, or at least they are not necessarily expressions taken seriously by the engineers.

Actions, too, have their closures. Each profession will have its customary practices, repertoires of actions imitated by the novices, rehearsed by apprentices, and which mark out its membership, and contrast with practices that are considered by the closure's authorities as eccentric, bizarre, improper or unprofessional.

Because the memberships of different groups are defined, in part, by the linguistic closures and routines that individuals help to maintain, the look and sound of wisdom imparted by an engineer would be different from the look and sound of wisdom imparted by a classicist or a politician since the words, phrases and procedures that they have legitimate access to are different. Furthermore there are no extra-linguistic ways of formulating criteria and debating the wisdom offered within the different genres, and this makes it impossible for anyone, besieged in their linguistic citadel, to prove to outsiders that an expression of wisdom in one dominion has a universal precedence over an expression of wisdom in another.

This does not prevent people making claims about wise statements and verifying that, within their favoured genre, statements of wisdom from outsiders have little value. It does not prevent people labelling outsiders as being foolish. But these are claims that cannot be universally substantiated and there are no ultimate grounds for saying that the members of partic-

ular professional group — nurses, physicists, engineers, doctors, or historians, for example — have a monopoly on expressions of wisdom or offer wise decrees with a higher value.

The test for wisdom is action (or inaction). Action in specific circumstances in response to sapient counsel provides the personal experience that lends value to advice. Anything beyond individual experience requires communication which may be part of a conversation, an exchange of letters or simply the casting of a smile or a tear (though it would be only *in extremis* that professional engineers could legitimately bring themselves to weep) but, subject to dissimulation and misconstrual, closed games of communication cannot transport faithfully the value of tendered words or conduct.

WISE ADVICE

Those with wisdom are expected to be able to help others by advising them how to act. Wise people are not necessarily seen taking wise actions themselves, but are seen to impart wisdom so that others act in better ways. Though, of course, advising people is a kind of action and intervening to offer advice is an action too. Primarily wise people provide discrete but crucial influences on other people's actions.

Wisdom seems to imply an ability to predict. Confronted with a situation, a wise person will occasionally advise or act in a way that is not anticipated by others. The consequences of the wise action are said to be better in some way than the consequences of alternative actions. Thus a judgement about wisdom involves comparing what happened with stories about what might have happened. Those attributed with wisdom are judged to be consistently capable of choosing actions that ensure a good outcome overall, or at least outcomes that allay an inevitable trauma. Wise people seem to have a sense that indicates to them what is the right thing to do, and this rare

skill cloaks them in mystery. Sometimes the wise person will say the same as everyone else but sometimes their action or advice will be different and at these times they display a characteristic of the wise; they display their independence from institutions or other people´s expectations. (Though at times it might be wise not to display that independence).

Without experience, the valuation it offers and wisdom it bears I must either act arbitrarily or translate a predicament into a puzzle to which I can systematically work out the solution. Systematically means using my training borne from the experience of a text that I treat as being a model of my situation. My solution to the puzzle may also be the creation of a text which I treat as an analogy of the resolution of my specific problem and, because it has been systematically worked out, the solution to the puzzle might be called the reasonable solution.

Alternatively within my linguistic closure, I can draw on handed down moral tales and continue the custom of receiving wisdom in the form of allegories. Allegories have been closely associated religious texts such as the Persian scriptures and in the Bible and with secular texts such as Aesop's fables. These tales often set out circumstances, that report on the actions of wise (or foolish) persons and detail the consequences. These are texts, or narratives, that we treat as being analogous to situations that we might find ourselves in, so the story with its solution to a puzzle provides the model for wise action (or guidance on actions to be avoided). Allegories are a mystical formula for action. They are mystical because they are about situations and characters that people are unlikely to encounter, and because they portray analogies which have to be drawn, the application of an allegory is an uncertain art. The analogy offered by the tale can guide our individual actions, but the tale does not refer to our specific circumstances. There is always a gulf between solving a puzzle, or reading (or listening to) a story or anecdote, and acting.

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Soloman's judgement is recorded as a wise judgement. Faced with a dispute over who is the mother of a baby, Solomon utters words which surprise, or even shock us. He commands that the baby is divided into two. The story then shows that this a successful ploy to identify the mother. Faced with the threat we are lead to believe that the mother relinquishes her claim and thus identifies herself. Mercifully the baby was not harmed. Can we be sure the mother was identified? What about the other woman and her grief over losing the child? What if Solomon had been pushed into fulfilling his threat? After all, he was a powerful, aggressive ruler who could not afford to lose face.

Fortunately for us, even if the characters in the legend do mirror people who lived, the situation is beyond our grasp. What we are dealing with is a story, in a text that we can grasp and control. So that we can provide an untested account where Solomon's actions turn out to be wise and the effect of the dramatisation is to present 'Solomon', the powerful ruler, as a model and as an icon of wisdom.

The wise characters in a story, or conundrum, become mythological icons of wisdom and, because of the potential analogies, the stories project sagacity on to people that we encounter and who themselves may become our icons.

One of our present day icons of wisdom is the Internet. On the Internet I found the *Daily Wisdom*, and, on the day I looked, the *Daily Wisdom* related an allegory about an alligator (Rice 1994). An old lady, it seems, was at fault for having let an alligator stay in her pond, the gruesome consequences for her were that she had her hand bitten off. We are encouraged as a result of this story to clear the alligators out of our own pond. But to make use of the story to guide my actions I must try to work out what analogues I would put in place of the alligator, the pond and the old lady (and possibly the severed

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hand). That is a problem for me that is not solved by the allegory.

Science too is offered as an icon of wisdom. Science and its claim to provide universal laws offers a means of extrapolation and the potential to make reliable but sometimes counter intuitive predictions. One difficulty is that for many situations the effort involved in computing the future course of events using scientific formulae is impractically large. An alternative is to ignore some features of a situation, but such simplification may lead to useless predictions. Science does not provide the ultimate test which indicates whether or not it would be wise to use the results of an abridged scientific prediction. With their claimed universality scientific laws are themselves presented as texts that have to be treated as analogues of specific situations that people find themselves in. The premises of science, its laws and its logical deductions relate an allegory. The allegory is not about the situation in which the wise action is being taken but an analogue in which wise words and deductions are a simulation of wise arguments and wise actions. As a simulation they remove the author from the responsibilities that the interpreter of the simulation must bear.

In this respect the scientific adviser appears to be in the same position as the fortune teller or Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's play, *The Rival*, who appears to misuse words to create her own special kind of language (Sheridan 1973). In spite of her unusual use of language we believe we know what she intended. Occasionally her apparent misuse creates additional effects which often seem strangely appropriate so that the misuse displays an uncanny wisdom. This may not be her intention; it is our observation.

Miroslav Holub provides an amusing anecdote about the sine of an angle (See Chapter 9, page 193). He presents a situation where a stubborn teacher insists that a trigonometrical calculation is correct even though it involves the sine of an angle

being greater than one. In circumstances that are described it would be foolish to suggest that a sine could be greater than one. After I had heard the story I wondered, "Could you have a sine greater than one?" and the answer is "Yes" — if you work with what mathematicians call complex numbers, then sines greater than one are possible. Now I do not think for a second that this was relevant to Miroslav Holub's anecdote about a lecture on ballistics, but amongst mathematicians in a present day convention on mathematics what in one context seemed to be a rash and foolish statement would be commonplace and unexceptional. Again it is the listener who must assesses the wisdom of the sermon.

BEWARE OF ICONS

Imagine you are viewing a scene with someone in the role of the innocent and inexperienced character not knowing what to do and worried about acting arbitrarily. There is an older person who gives the impression of great experience and seriousness. The elder appears to be wise and talks in mystical ways but is reluctant to openly demonstrate the practicability of his suggestions. Added to this dramatic performance is a chorus that applauds and approves of the unexpectedly good results that the persuasive sage repeatedly seems to achieve, as if by magic, by directing the actions of the neophyte. This is not the setting of a classic tale, a Greek tragedy or a presentation by a conjurer but it is an outline of a television advertisement for a simple metal and plastic vegetable cutter. The dramatisation has appropriated an icon of wisdom, the older, mature person, for the mission to sell. Packaged and delivered by elaborate technology and extensive, veiled institutions, the advertisement can create an image of wisdom that no individual can match. This advertisement followed ancient traditions where quacks have appropriated privileged language and displayed a simulated authority, sorcerers have conducted simulated wars with puzzles, obstacles and traps and conjurers have practised their art of deception; thus through the advertise-

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ment persuasive, simulated wisdom can be transformed into a commodity embruing products and services.

So in a world where models of wisdom are mystics like Merlin, Obi Wan Kanobe or Gandalf, or the healthy members of our schools of beauty who populate our mass media, it is the quarry who needs to exercise judgement. A judgement has to be made about how seriously we are to treat our icons of wisdom as we encounter them. Wisdom is in the hands of the adjudicator rather than the purveyor of icons. Ultimately the responsibility for behaving wisely rests with individuals who must judge the advice they are given.

The V-chip is a proposed electronic device that will censor TV programmes (Blakey 1996; Myers 1996). The aim is to prevent children seeing programmes considered unsuitable for youngsters. Some authority will then electronically mark the broadcasts. The V-chip, if enabled, will prevent the marked programmes from being displayed. Similarly software is available for Internet browsers that blocks requests to access documents catalogued by censorship agencies (McCullagh 1996). The responsibility for selecting documents is ceded to the authorities that may, or may not act wisely. On the other hand parents, and indeed the children, could, without the aid of the technology, exercise their own judgement and control and cultivate their own wisdom.

RESOLUTION

There is a requirement to listen, to criticise, to treat authorities with a little scepticism, to evaluate those authorities and to promote the authorities that you find valuable. The authentic way to find what you value is to be loyal to your own feelings, that is calibrate your evaluation against your own experience. If I do not have faith in my feelings, or in my rationalisations then I can either chose arbitrarily, or seek advice. But this turns me towards the wise person, who has experienced much:

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should they always to be treated with scepticism? Faced with uncertainty and in an unfamiliar situation we may be anxious about acting arbitrarily and we need authorities to provoke action otherwise we remain frozen by our own neuroses. But in these situations we are vulnerable, easily manipulated and potential prey. That is why we have to get to know what we value and that, as Martha Nussbaum has argued compellingly using the story about Agamemnon´s sacrifice of his daughter as an illustration, is found out by experience (Nussbaum 1986 p.36) not from the classroom.

We present and memorize many texts, scientific and literary, as exemplars of wise words without waiting to see if the wisdom is borne out in specific situations. In this way calling our stories wise tales involves a metaphorical use of the word wise and not something to be treated literally. It is simply an indication of our approval of a particular genre. My conclusion is that we mostly use the word 'wisdom' as a metaphor to draw people's attention and to promote what is being said.

Expressions of 'wisdom' require evaluation. Only after an evaluation can we say that an expression is literally wise and not a metaphorical illusion; evaluation requires action, feeling and a critical self-consciousness. Everyone has to experience their own feelings, and must make their own judgements; everyone has to be their own savant. Everyone has to seek their own wisdom, their own icons and their own models, evaluate them, and take responsibility for their interpretation.

Ultimately we fashion and resfashion our language as experience transforms metaphorical expressions of wisdom into literal tenets and we shape or reshape our reality as rehearsal propels our chosen texts from being mere models towards becoming our actuality — a ramshackle, recondite scaffold for our actions, which shores up our linguistic closure and frames our points of view.

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