Imagine, if you will, university students turning up for their first philosophy class. Imagine, then, the tutor asking them why they wish to study philosophy. Imagine, further, a student replying, "Because I am searching for wisdom." I leave it to you to imagine what happens next. It is well known that the etymology of 'philosophy' is 'love of wisdom', but wisdom itself is conspicuous by its absence from philosophy curricula at all levels, and it is certainly not what philosophy departments profess to teach. On the face of it this seems a curious situation. How has it come about, and what does it mean?

It was not always thus. In The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom (Rice, 1958, p.2) Eugene Rice wrote, "Wisdom was an ideal of twenty two centuries. It described the highest knowledge men were capable of and the most desirable patterns of human behaviour. It mirrored man's conception of himself, of the world, and of God." These twenty two centuries came to an end at the close of the Renaissance, and commenced with the earliest days of ancient Greek philosophy. However, long before even that distant time, wisdom was an aspiration of other cultures of the ancient world. The oldest extant wisdom texts from Egypt were written another twenty two centuries before the time of the first Greek philosophers.

What has happened since the Renaissance to overturn such a long tradition? Why is it that now 'wisdom' is a term more associated with New Age texts than philosophical ones? It is not a simple story. In the first place it should be pointed out that whereas wisdom may have been universally prized in the ancient world, there was no universal agreement as to what it actually was. Secondly, it was widely regarded as belonging to the gods rather than humans. Thirdly, those who allowed it a place within the human frame of reference often saw it as embodied in concrete individuals rather than in written texts. This is one of the reasons why histories of philosophy written in the ancient world show a predilection for structuring their narratives in terms of lineages, indicating the importance attached to the close personal relationship between teacher and pupil. (The histories of Buddhist sects tend to be structured the same way, although sometimes personal transmission is replaced by reincarnation.)

Wisdom has been pushed to the sidelines of modern philosophy, when it has not been banished altogether, for a number of reasons. At the risk of considerable over-simplification, I will suggest some of these with reference to a handful of individuals who played significant roles in this process. First, there was Gutenberg. The invention of movable type transformed the role of the written word in western culture. (Marshall McLuhan's The Gutenberg Galaxy (McLuhan,1969) is a set of fascinating, if sometimes eccentric, reflections on the impact of this development.) Then there was Francis Bacon. Along with a number of his contemporaries, such as Galileo, he pushed science in a more experimental direction, providing the foundations of modern technology. Next (although he died only a few years after Galileo) there was Descartes. Under his influence the problem of knowledge became the central concern of philosophy (historians of philosophy have reinterpreted a great deal of ancient philosophy in this light), with the truths of mathematics becoming the standard by which all other claims were to be judged. A striking illustration of this last point lies in the fact that Spinoza, one of the great figures of modern philosophy who was very much interested in wisdom, felt the need to write about it (in his Ethics) in a format appropriated from geometry. Finally, perhaps I
should mention Hume. The impact of the 'is/ought' distinction which he introduced in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* has been very considerable, whether or not it was what he intended.

Having outlined some pieces of the jigsaw, I will now try to build a recognisable picture out of them. To return to Rice's characterisation of wisdom, "man's conception of himself, of the world, and of God" has been very much seen as the business of science in the modern world. With a massive helping hand from Newton, a mechanistic outlook was developed which had no place for God, along with a fairly inconspicuous one for man. (Although enormously subverted by developments in atomic and sub-atomic physics, this mechanistic outlook is still, I suspect, widely regarded as *the* scientific one.) Neil Armstrong's small step was not so much a giant leap for mankind as an indication of what a particular culture increasingly centred around science and technology could achieve. Even when the subject which science studied was human nature itself, the framework for the pursuit of knowledge laid down by Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method* meant that it was likely to take an analytical and reductionist direction. The very term 'social science' betrays the prevalence and power of the scientific paradigm.

The other area of wisdom to which Rice refers concerns "the most desirable patterns of human behaviour", or, for want of a better word, ethics. The fate of moral philosophy (and, to some extent, philosophy as a whole) in the modern world seems to me to exemplify the belief that there is a choice between being scientific and being irrelevant or trivial. This idea is sometimes, wrongly, associated with Wittgenstein, but its antecedents can clearly be seen in Hume. Utilitarians sought to give moral philosophy a scientific basis by founding it on measurement, and utilitarianism has achieved a certain everyday credibility for that reason. On the whole, however, I think the position is best summarised by Karl-Otto Apel in his *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* (Apel, 1983, pp 228-23), where he suggests that the modern world has tended to convert both ethics and religion into purely subjective areas of life. They have become approximated to matters of taste, and *de gustibus non disputandum*. The reluctance of philosophers in the English speaking world to engage with any kind of practical moral issue for several decades of the twentieth century perhaps constituted the high watermark of this particular tide.

The fact that the tide now appears to have turned may afford some grounds for optimism. However, the matter is not quite so simple. A good illustration of this may be had in the relatively new field of environmental ethics. Environmental ethicists come in many different philosophical shapes. One of the best known is Peter Singer whose work on the proper treatment of animals is solidly within the utilitarian tradition. Perhaps less well known, but certainly highly influential, is Arne Naess, who has come up with the term 'ecosophy' (Naess, 1989, p.37). For Naess and many other radical environmental philosophers, the aim of environmental philosophy might be characterised as seeking to understand the nature of the world, our place in it, and how best to act in it. A comparison of this characterisation of environmental philosophy with Rice's of wisdom readily reveals why 'ecosophy' may be a particularly appropriate term. It is also interesting to note that Naess seems to have attracted something of a personal following. How significant for the cause of wisdom these developments are, it is too early to tell. However, it does seem fair to say that *at least* in some areas, wisdom is once again an object of interest within philosophy.

Whilst this is to be welcomed, it also needs to be placed in its appropriate perspective. 'Philosopher' was a term which, in its origins, suggested a degree of
humility. The lover of wisdom did not claim to possess it. It was, as Rice says, an ideal. Even those schools of antiquity which believed it to be an attainable ideal nevertheless also thought that few actually managed to achieve it. (New Age literature, on the other hand, seems to suggest that it is readily and widely available, thereby priming the pumps of ego inflation!) It cannot be assumed that just because philosophers may want to be wise again, they will be. If it were that easy, we would all be wise already.

How, then, should the lover of wisdom proceed? It seems to me that the philosophical pursuit of wisdom requires that philosophy itself be substantially overhauled and given a new direction (which is also a very old one). The following points are indicative of what I have in mind.

(1) Philosophy should once more be seen as a way of life. At the very least this means recognising that ethics lies at the heart of philosophy. (It seems to me that all the great philosophers are united in this recognition.) The idea that ethics is just another part of philosophy needs to be firmly rejected.

(2) At the same time, ethics itself needs to address the whole of life, and not just a special area or set of problems within it. This is a problem which a lot of recent work on applied ethics has unfortunately only served to exacerbate.

(3) Given that our lives take place within a wider context, an effort must be made to understand that context. This involves at least three different projects. First, although philosophy should not ape science, it should not scorn it either. Secondly, science itself needs to be located within a metaphysical outlook. We neglect metaphysics at our peril. Thirdly, in addition to an intellectual knowledge of the world, there must also be a proper perceptual knowledge of it. In particular, this means attempting to perceive the world as it is rather than in terms of our own interests.

(4) Our understanding of the world needs to be complemented by an understanding of ourselves. There is no older philosophical motto than "Know thyself!", and few greater temptations than self-deception.

It will, I think, be plain even from this very brief account that such a programme is a daunting one. It also diverges radically from what routinely takes place in academic institutions, with, again, at least one honourable exception in the shape of some courses in environmental philosophy. It may well be that if this kind of reorientation of philosophy is to be achieved, it will happen largely outside the academic world. It would be gratifying to think that the activities of members of the SCP will be instrumental in this.

There is much more that could be said, and a lot of it I have already said in my book Wisdom, Intuition and Ethics (Curnow, 1999). For those who prefer something older (and cheaper!), you might begin with The Discourses of Epictetus. As a closing thought, it occurs to me that when I meet my next group of environmental philosophy students, should any of them reveal that they have joined the course in order to search for wisdom, I might tell them that they have at least taken a step in the right direction!
References


1 DAY PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING 'TASTER' COURSE

The Programme
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What is Philosophical Counselling?
Philosophical counselling is an approach to counselling that uses philosophical insights and techniques to help you think about your life. Your problems are not seen as illnesses to be cured. Instead your counsellor will engage with you in a dialogue whose aim is to help you think more clearly and deeply about your issues.

Aim of the workshop.
The workshop aims to familiarise delegates with philosophical counselling, and to enable them to study and discuss its different aspects of it. If is an ideal first step for those interested in going on to train as philosophical counsellors.

Course topics
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How does it differ from other forms of counselling?
What is philosophical about philosophical counselling?
What further steps do I need to take to train as a philosophical counsellor?

Facilitator: Tim LeBon

The fee per participant is £60 (full), £50 (SCP member). For information about reductions for students and others please contact David Arnaud. Please make cheques payable to Society of Consultant Philosophers (SCP) and send to: David Arnaud, 8 Richmond Rd, N2 8JT. Email DavidArnau@aol.com