In *The Heart of Judgment*, Leslie Paul Thiele explores the historical significance and present-day relevance of practical wisdom. Though primarily a work in moral and political philosophy, the book relies extensively on the latest research in cognitive neuroscience to confirm and extend its original insights. While giving credit to the roles played by reason and deliberation in the exercise of judgment, Thiele underscores the central importance of intuition, emotion, and worldly experience. In turn, he argues that narrative constitutes a form of ersatz experience, and as such is crucial to the development of the faculty of judgment.

Ever since the ancient Greeks first discussed the virtue of *phronesis*, practical wisdom has been an important topic for philosophers and political theorists. Thiele observes that it remains one of the qualities most demanded of public officials and that the welfare of democratic regimes rests on the cultivation of good judgment among citizens. *The Heart of Judgment* offers a new understanding of an ancient virtue while providing an innovative assessment of the salience of practical wisdom in contemporary society.

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The Heart of Judgment

Practical Wisdom, Neuroscience, and Narrative

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Preface

This book was conceived as a theoretical account of human judgment, the offspring of a traditional marriage of political philosophy and intellectual history. In time, however, it came to benefit from a broader parentage. In the end, it might be considered a child of miscegenation.

During the book’s long gestation, I was often subject to doubts of the sort first voiced to me by an applicant for a faculty position in my department. This young political theorist had written a paper on judgment as a preamble to his doctoral thesis some years earlier. It seemed promising work. His dissertation, I now learned, was on a completely different topic. Why, I asked, had he changed course? He answered that he found the question of judgment inherently interesting and of great significance to moral and political thought. But after examining the available literature on the topic, he found himself with little to add, and, what was perhaps more disconcerting, with few enduring intellectual achievements to build upon. Practical judgment, he held, was simply too enigmatic a faculty to allow much in the way of cogent theorizing.

This widely shared experience helps explain the relative dearth of scholarship addressing practical judgment in the 2,500-year history of moral and political thought. If we continue the millennia-old search for the “Holy Grail of good judgment,” recent scholars have concluded, we do so not because there are reasons to expect success, but because giving up hope is unconscionable. In any case, the nature of practical wisdom and the workings of the judging mind will likely remain a
After digesting much of what there was to read on the topic, I, too, sensed that the nut of judgment could not be cracked, and that those who tried were simply spinning their wheels. The subject appeared to have been taken about as far as it could go by conventional means, including anything I might add to the theoretical literature.

Two events changed my mind. First, I came across a number of philosophers who focused on the role of literature in the cultivation of moral virtues, including the virtue of practical wisdom. In turn, I began reading works in cognitive neuroscience, a field of study increasingly occupied with the nature of decision-making and human judgment. Initially there appeared to be no linkage between these two new avenues of study, the humanistic and the scientific. Then I discovered neuroscientists who were addressing the role of narrative in human consciousness. They did not forgo empirical analysis to extol the virtues of fiction. Rather, they offered sound scientific arguments for understanding the development of the brain in terms of narrative structures. In turn, they posited the faculty of judgment, among other cognitive abilities, as a product of narrative knowledge. The more I explored these diverse fields, the more it became apparent that the study of practical judgment had not reached a dead end in the history of thought. In an important sense, it was just beginning. What follows is a political philosopher’s attempt to grapple with this renaissance.

With neuroimaging (brain scanning) increasingly employed to develop advertising techniques, influence decision-making among citizens during election campaigns, combat mental illness, and improve moral awareness, the nascent fields of neuroeconomics, neuropolitics, neuropsychology, and neuroethics are thriving. There are dangers as well as opportunities here. The most rewarding aspect of delving into cognitive science for me has been the empirical vindication of some of the most insightful theoretical accounts of judgment, from Aristotle through contemporary pragmatism. But my use of science to vindicate philosophy is not meant to suggest that the latter has been surpassed by the former. Science has a privileged status in contemporary society, and that
is often a good thing. Its ability to invest our lives with meaning, how-
ever, is quite limited. To the extent that it accomplishes this feat at all, science, like analytic efforts in philosophy, remains parasitic on narrative resources. The increasing use of narrative as a matrix for understanding neurological processes is, therefore, an intriguing development. It offers tantalizing glimpses of a more holistic approach to the human condition. And, refreshingly, it cuts squarely against earlier, mechanistic models of science. A growing number of the most advanced empirical studies – those that investigate the neurophysics of the brain – do not lead in the direction of biological determinism or crass reductionism. Rather, they affirm the importance of (self-)consciousness as a narrative process and confirm our creative ability to interact with and shape internal and external environments. To the extent that cognitive neuroscience further develops a relationship to humanistic understanding, it may ward off the hubris that doomed so many of its imperialistic forebears.

In the pages that follow, I provide readers from a wide variety of academic disciplines and lay perspectives with a historically informed, philosophically grounded, and scientifically defensible account of the judging mind. My effort has been to place contemporary neuroscientific research in the context of conceptual treatments of judgment found in works of moral and political philosophy, and vice versa. In turn, I provide a sustained investigation of the narrative foundations of judgment and, more generally, the narrative foundations of ethico-political life. My hope is that humanistically oriented readers will be stimulated by the opportunity to supplement introspection, historical investigation, and conceptual analysis with new sources of knowledge from the neurosciences. Scientifically oriented readers, in turn, might be equally pleased with the fruits of philosophical and historical reflection. Of course, neither the scientific nor the humanistic community may look favorably upon such a hybrid effort. The only apology available at this stage is the assertion that human judgment is itself a hybrid faculty. Blending rational, perceptual, and affective capacities, operating at the conscious level and below the threshold of awareness, taking heed of hard facts as well as narrative coherence, the human judge manages to forge meaningful patterns from a blooming, buzzing world. Making sense of human judgment demands an equally synthetic approach.

As to my motivation for writing this book, I defer to Solon and Sopho-
cles. Solon was one of ancient Athens’ greatest lawmakers. His political reforms set the stage for the rise of democracy. “The hardest thing of all,”
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Solon avers, “is to recognize the invisible mean of judgment, which alone contains the limits of all things.”

Sophocles was one of Athens’ greatest playwrights. His Antigone depicts a mighty king brought low by his own misrule. In the midst of the carnage, a messenger arrives, offering insight to redeem the tragedy. “Of all the ills afflicting men,” the messenger observes, “the worst is lack of judgment.” Exercising good judgment is the most difficult task for human beings, and the most needful. This ancient wisdom presents the contemporary world with an urgent challenge and provides the impetus for what follows.

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