Why Experience Matters

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Kathleen Cahalan on “Why Experience Matters”

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Kathleen Cahalan

Do you want a cardiac surgeon who is not a good cutter? Or a child care provider who does not know the difference between a bad mood and a tantrum? Or a judge who does not know how to administer the law?

Experience matters because it is the basis of good judgment. It provides us with insight into the particularities of situations. But experience alone is not enough, according to Aristotle. That knowledge must be combined with wisdom (sophia), what we hold to be the highest moral truths. Together these two kinds of knowledge provide a person with phronesis—the ability to do the “right thing, in the right way, and at the right time.” Phronesis is engaged knowing; it is situational and particular but at the same time informed by reason and moral frameworks.

As the authors of Christian Practical Wisdom write, practical wisdom “denotes a kind of knowing that is morally attuned, rooted in a tradition that affirms the good, and drive toward aims that seek the good. It is not a package of pre-planned rules but stays open and adaptive to new situations. It is nimble and at times even self-critical. Most of all, this knowledge is
practical, grounded in ordinary experience, and learned over time in the company of others and 
for the sake of others.”

Why is being a good cutter not enough for a cardiac surgeon? For one, it reduces 
the practice of surgery to a technical skill. Aristotle’s point is that phronesis is less about the cardiac 
surgeon’s ability to cut into your chest, and more about her ability to understand your particular 
heart condition, to respond to your emotional needs, and to help you find ways to change your 
life so that open surgery may not be necessary. The surgeon has to bring her knowledge about 
how hearts work to bear on your particular situation and she must bring that into play with what 
she discerns is your ability to face surgery or make adaptive changes in your lifestyle. She has to 
be able to talk to you about your hopes and fears for your life. And that will distinctive in 
comparison to the next patient.

That said, the surgeon’s ability to do surgery is essential. In fact, what the body knows is 
essential to experience and practical wisdom. As many artists, neonatal nurses, musicians, and 
athletes will tell you: the body must be trained, over time, in order that it be inscribed with a kind 
of muscle memory about how to do what needs to be done. Richard Bresnahan, artist-in- 
residence and Master Potter at Saint John’s Pottery, requires his apprentices to make 1000 mugs. 
They can only come to know what clay is and what it does by practice, practice, and more 
practice. Clay is different if it is 80 degrees and sunny or 30 below and frigid.

Phronesis requires this kind of attention to embodied practical experience. Bent 
Flyvbjerg, an expert on megaproject management, notes that learning to make judgments in 
everyday situations requires extensive experience. “Common to all experts is that they operate on 
the basis of intimate knowledge of several thousand concrete cases in their areas of expertise.” A 
child care provider has seen enough tantrums to know what they are; he’s also dealt with enough 
children to make a pretty good guess about what this child needs in this moment. Of course, he 
could be wrong, but that’s just more experience to add to his case-based knowing. The same is 
true for the judge.

Combining embodied know-how, practical reasoning, and situational understanding with 
decision-making ability, is what nursing educator Patricia Benner calls “a sense of salience.” 
Such a practitioner knows what to do and when and why to do it, and they can give reasons for 
their actions. Such knowledge only comes from practice where mistakes and failures become 
opportunities for figuring out what just happened and how one might do it differently the next 
time a similar case comes around.

Some think that little or no experience is a good thing when taking up a new position, 
work that one has never performed, and in a context in which a person has never worked. It may 
be that people can bring fresh perspectives to unfamiliar situations. But a lack of experience can 
be quite costly to them and to others. They lack practical wisdom, the experience necessary upon 
which to base their actions and judgments. They have not practiced enough to build up a body of 
insight based on at least 1,000 cases.

And that’s why experience really matters.
Kathleen A. Cahalan, professor of practical theology, Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary, is one of the five authors of Christian Practical Wisdom, published by Wm. E. Eerdmans in 2016.