ABSTRACT. The strengths and virtues identified by positive psychology are treated as logically independent, and it is recommended that people identify their “signature” strengths and cultivate them, because more of a strength is better [Peterson and Seligman: 2004, Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification (Oxford University Press, New York); Seligman: 2002, Authentic Happiness (Free Press, New York)]. The present paper contrasts that view with the Aristotelian view that virtues are interdependent, that happiness (eudaimonia) requires all the virtues, and that more of a virtue is not always better than less. We argue that practical wisdom is the master virtue essential to solving problems of specificity, relevance, and conflict that inevitably arise whenever character strengths must be translated into action in concrete situations. We also argue that practical wisdom is becoming increasingly difficult to nurture and display in modern society, so that attention must be paid to reshaping social institutions to encourage the use of practical wisdom rather than inhibiting it.

KEY WORDS: character strengths, positive psychology, practical wisdom, virtues

“WHAT GRADE DO I GIVE?”

Suppose you are grading term papers. You read one written by a student who is struggling to get a C in your course. It is decently written and coherently organized, and it has no major misunderstandings of key concepts. It is a B− paper, but it is by far the best work this student has done in your course. Next, you turn to one written by the smartest student in the class, someone who is effortlessly “acing” everything you throw her way. It is well written and clearly organized, and it demonstrates fine comprehension. A solid B+, perhaps even an A−. But it lacks spark. It is not very original. It does not go very far beyond what was said in class. This student could definitely have done a much better piece of work.
So what grades do you give? Do you give the grades the papers deserve in themselves, evaluating them as if you did not know who wrote them? Or do you give the grades they deserve, but encourage the C student about how good it was and admonish the A student about how disappointing it was? Is this enough recognition of individual difference, or should you go further, actually giving each student a grade based not only on the merits of the paper, but also on the relation of the paper’s quality to each student’s past work? What effect will each of these courses of action have on the students involved? Should grading be based only on the quality of the work or also on the effort expended? Which approach to grading is fairest? Which is kindest? Which is most effective? And which of these things should you be caring about?

“HOW DO I LOOK?”

You are keeping your best friend company as she gets dressed to go to a wedding. When she puts on her dress, which you have never seen before, you think it is extremely unflattering. “How do I look?” she says. What do you say? Do you tell her she looks great, or do you tell the truth? Many of us believe that real friendships must be based on complete honesty. If you cannot trust your friends, you cannot trust anyone, and you can’t trust your friends unless you can count on them to tell you the truth. So this little problem seems like no problem at all. Telling your friend the truth would be doing her a favor. But beyond that, it is essential to preserving the foundations of the friendship.

Yes, but. As you are about to open your mouth to tell your friend to pick something else, a wave of considerations might come crashing over you. The wedding is in a few hours. Does she have an alternative? Do you know that she will look better in something else? Does she need to feel good about herself – to have her confidence bolstered – right now? Even if she has an alternative, what will it do to her confidence to hear that even though she thought she looked great, her best friend thought otherwise? Will it undermine her ability to judge how she looks in the future?