

The Wisdom in Feeling: Psychological Processes in Emotional Intelligence

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Every time I utter the word "wisdom," someone giggles or sneers. Wisdom, more so even than expertise, does not sit comfortably in a democratic, anti-elitist society. In an age dominated by science and technology, by specialization and compartmentalization, it is too loose, too grand, and too mysterious a concept. With our heads in our smartphones and tablets, in our bills and bank statements, we simply do not have the time or mental space for it.

But things were not always thus. The word "wisdom" features 222 times in the Old Testament, which includes all of seven so-called "wisdom books": Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the Book of Wisdom, and Sirach. "For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it" (Ecclesiastes 7:12). Many things can lengthen your life, but only wisdom can save it.

The word "philosophy" literally means "the love of wisdom," and wisdom is the overarching aim of philosophy, or, at least, ancient philosophy. In Plato's *Lysis*, Socrates tells the young Lysis that, without wisdom, he would be of no value to anyone: "if you are wise, all men will be your friends and kindred, for you will be useful and good; but if you are not wise, neither father, nor mother, nor kindred, nor anyone else, will be your friends." The patron goddess of Athens, the city in which the *Lysis* is set, is no less than Athena, goddess of wisdom, who sprung out from the skull of Zeus clad in full armour. Her symbol, and the symbol of wisdom, is the owl, a bird of prey which can cleave through darkness.

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Indeed, "wisdom" derives from the Proto-Indo-European root *weid-*, "to see," and is related to a great number of words including: advice, druid, evident, guide, Hades, history, idea, idol, idyll, view, Veda, vision, and visit. In Norse mythology, the god Odin gouged out one of his eyes and offered it to Mimir in exchange for a drink from the well of knowledge and wisdom, symbolically trading one mode of perception for another, higher one.

And the very name of our species, *Homo sapiens*, signifies "wise man."

Wisdom in perspective

But what exactly is wisdom? People often speak of "knowledge and wisdom" as though they might be closely related or even the same thing. So one hypothesis is that wisdom is knowledge, or a great deal of knowledge. If wisdom is knowledge, then it has to be a certain kind of knowledge, or else learning the phonebook, or the names of all the rivers in the world, might count as wisdom. And if wisdom is a certain kind of knowledge, then it is not scientific or technical knowledge, or else contemporary people would be wiser than even the

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wisest of ancient philosophers. Any twenty-first century school-leaver would be wiser than a Seneca or a Socrates.

Once upon a time, Chaerephon asked the oracle at Delphi whether there was anyone wiser than his friend Socrates, and the Pythian priestess replied that there was no one wiser. To discover the meaning of this divine utterance, Socrates questioned a number of men who laid claim to wisdom—politicians, generals, poets, craftsmen—and in each case concluded, "I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." From then on, Socrates dedicated himself to the service of the gods by seeking out anyone who might be wise and, "if he is not, showing him that he is not." Over the years, he made so many enemies by his questioning that the Athenians condemned him to death—which served his purposes well, since it made him immortal. Today, Socrates is chiefly remembered by his death, with Seneca going so far as to opine that "it was the hemlock that made Socrates great" (*cicuta magnum Socratem fecit*).

The Bible tells us, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom." Socrates was the wisest of all people not because he knew everything or anything, but because he knew what he did not know—or, more subtly, because he knew the limits of the little that he did know. In fact, the world really came together in the fifth century BC, with both Confucius and the Buddha echoing from afar the words of Socrates.

The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing. —Socrates

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's own ignorance. —Confucius

A fool who recognizes his own ignorance is thereby in fact a wise man. —Buddha

But it is no doubt Shakespeare who put it best, "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

Still, there seems to be more to wisdom than mere "negative knowledge," or else I could simply be super-skeptical about everything and count myself wise—Or maybe wisdom consists in having very high epistemic standards, that is, in having a very high bar for believing something, and an even higher bar for calling that belief knowledge. But then we are back to a picture of wisdom as something like scientific knowledge.

In Plato's Meno, Socrates says that people of wisdom and virtue seem to be very poor at imparting those qualities: Themistocles was able to teach his son Cleophantus skills such as standing upright on horseback and shooting javelins, but no one ever credited Cleophantus with anything like his father's wisdom; and the same could also be said for Lysimachus and his son Aristides, Pericles and his sons Paralus and Xanthippus, and Thucydides and his sons Melesias and Stephanus. And if wisdom cannot be taught, not even by the wisest of Athenians, then it is not a kind of knowledge.

If wisdom cannot be taught, how, asks Meno, did good people come into existence? Socrates replies that right action is possible under guidance other than that of knowledge: A person who has knowledge about the way to Larisa may make a good guide, but a person who has only correct opinion about the way, but has never been and does not know, might make an equally good guide.

Since wisdom cannot be taught, it cannot be knowledge; and if it cannot be knowledge, then it must be correct opinion—which explains why wise men such as Themistocles, Lysimachus, and Pericles were unable to impart their wisdom even unto their own sons. Wise people are no different from soothsayers, prophets, and poets, who say many true things when they are divinely inspired but have no real knowledge of what they are saying.

Aristotle gives us another important clue in the Metaphysics, when he says that wisdom is the understanding of causes. None of the senses are regarded as wisdom because, although they give the most authoritative knowledge of particulars, they are unable to discern the distal causes of anything. Similarly, we suppose artists to be wiser than people of mere experience because artists know the "why" or the cause, and can therefore teach, whereas people of experience do not, and cannot. In other words, wisdom is the understanding of the right relations between things, which calls for more distant and removed perspectives, and maybe also the ability or willingness to shift between perspectives.

In the Tusculan Disputations, Cicero cites as a paragon of wisdom the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras, who, upon being informed of the death of his son, said, "I knew that I begot a mortal" (Sciebam me genuisse mortalem). For Cicero, true sapience consists in preparing oneself for every eventuality so as never to be taken, or overtaken, by surprise. And it is true that wisdom, the understanding of causes and connexions, has forever been associated with both insight and foresight.

As I argue in my new book, *Hypersanity: Thinking Beyond Thinking*, wisdom is not so much a kind of knowledge as a way

of seeing, or ways of seeing. When we take a few steps back, like when we stand under the shower or go on holiday, we begin to see the bigger picture. In everyday language use, "wisdom" has two opposites: "foolishness" and "folly," which involve, respectively, lack and loss of perspective (both words derive from the Latin follis, "bellows," "bag").

For some thinkers, notably Robert Nozick, wisdom has a practical dimension in that it involves an understanding of the goals and values of life, the means of achieving those goals, the potential dangers to avoid, and so on. I agree, but I also think that all this naturally flows from perspective: If you have proper perspective, you cannot fail to understand the goals and values of life or indeed fail to act on that understanding. This chimes with Socrates' claim that nobody does wrong knowingly: People only do wrong because, from their limited perspective, it seems like the right or best thing for them to do. In the words of Jesus from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

In cultivating a broader perspective, it helps, of course, to be knowledgeable, but it also helps to be intelligent, reflective, open-minded, and disinterested—which is why we often seek out and pay for "independent" advice. But above all it helps to be courageous, because the view from up there, though it can be exhilarating, and ultimately liberating, is at first terrifying—not least because it conflicts with so much of what we have been taught or programmed to think.

Courage, said Aristotle, is the first of the human qualities because it is the one which guarantees all the others.

Reference

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