



What Is Wisdom and Why Do Philosophers Love It So?

PHILOSOPHY means the love of wisdom. What is wisdom? How shall it be loved? Wisdom is an understanding of what is important, where this understanding informs a (wise) person's thought and action. Things of lesser importance are kept in proper perspective. Wisdom's understanding is a special one, special in three ways: in the topics it concerns—the issues of life; in its special value for living; and in its not being universally shared. Something that everyone knew might be important but would not count as wisdom.

Wisdom is practical; it helps. *Wisdom is what you need to understand in order to live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicament(s) human beings find themselves in.**

* Complications could be added to this rough general description by ringing variations on each of its component notions. Is wisdom what you need to know or understand, or what it is important or necessary or very useful to understand? Does wisdom also include knowing how to come to know or understand it? Is it needed in order to live well, or best, or successfully, or happily, or satisfactorily, or as we are supposed to, or whatever the most important goal is, including

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This general account is designed to fit different particular conceptions of wisdom. These conceptions may differ in the goals (or dangers) they list or how they rank them, the coping devices they recommend, and so on, but what makes them all conceptions of wisdom, even when they differ in their content, is that all fit this general form. They fill in the schema: what you need to know in order to live well and cope. . . . Yet while this schema encompasses differing conceptions of wisdom, it is not empty. Not everything in the world fits it. (Sour cream does not.) Indeed, it might be thought that in specifying that wisdom is a kind of understanding or knowledge, the schema is unduly narrow. Couldn't some imaginable view hold that the best life is one lived without any knowledge or understanding at all? Perhaps so, but though that *view* might (if it were correct) itself contain wisdom, it would not be recommending a *life* that contained wisdom, whatever its other virtues. The point can be generalized. If wisdom is something specific that a person can have, we can imagine a view that maintains that the best life is one without that specific thing. So someone might object to any account of wisdom as arbitrarily excluding certain lives as best, those without that thing that has gotten specified as wisdom. This objection would be mistaken, however; the account itself will not exclude certain lives as best, only as being wise. It is theoretically possible, of course, for wisdom to describe the best or highest life without itself being any part of it. However, it is my assumption here that wisdom will be conducive to the best life as a means and also be some integral part of it. Any account of wisdom that was incompatible with its having this double role would be defective, I think. If wisdom is a certain kind of knowledge or understanding, we are committed then to valuing that kind of knowledge and to saying the best or highest life itself contains at least some of it. To what extent, and

perhaps achieving *satori* or the best existence in an afterlife? Is it the central problems that are to be coped with or also the dilemmas or issues or tragedies of life? Does it avoid the dangers or sometimes only diminish them? Does it sometimes tell how to escape from the human predicament completely? And so on. The simple description in the text will serve us well enough, though. An even fuller discussion would take account of the fact that wisdom comes in degrees; a person can be more or less wise. It is not a question simply of being wise or not.

in what form, that knowledge is held is not decided by wisdom's general description.

Wisdom is not just knowing fundamental truths, if these are unconnected with the guidance of life or with a perspective on its meaning. If the deep truths physicists describe about the origin and functioning of the universe have little practical import and do not change our picture of the meaning of the universe and our place within it, then knowing them would not count as wisdom. (However, a view that traced the origin and continuance of the universe to a divine being's plans could count that knowledge as wisdom if it yielded conclusions about the purpose and most appropriate mode of human life.)

Wisdom is not just one type of knowledge, but diverse. What a wise person needs to know and understand constitutes a varied list: the most important goals and values of life—the ultimate goal, if there is one; what means will reach these goals without too great a cost; what kinds of dangers threaten the achieving of these goals; how to recognize and avoid or minimize these dangers; what different types of human beings are like in their actions and motives (as this presents dangers or opportunities); what is not possible or feasible to achieve (or avoid); how to tell what is appropriate when; knowing when certain goals are sufficiently achieved; what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them; how to improve oneself and one's relationships with others or society; knowing what the true and unapparent value of various things is; when to take a long-term view; knowing the variety and obduracy of facts, institutions, and human nature; understanding what one's own real motives are; how to cope and deal with the major tragedies and dilemmas of life, and with the major good things too. There also will be bits of negative wisdom: certain things are *not* important, other things not effective means, etc. Any good collection of aphorisms will contain this and more, mixed among its witty cynicisms.

Perhaps the diversity of wisdom is only apparent and it all can flow from some one central understanding, but this should not be assumed or stipulated at the outset. Would someone who understood the one truth from which all of wisdom flowed be wiser than someone who lived and advised similarly yet grasped only the diversity? The first would see more deeply, but, if the theoretical unification

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could make no practical difference, it is not clear he would be wiser.*

A wise person knows these diverse things and lives them. Someone who only knew them, who offered good advice to others yet who lived foolishly himself, would not be termed wise. We might voice the suspicion that this person would not know at least one thing—namely, how to apply the rest of what he knew. Is it strictly impossible, though, that he did know how to apply the rest of his knowledge, he just did not *do* so? One can know how to swim without going swimming. However we answer this question, to *be* wise, a person not only must *have* knowledge and understanding—have wisdom, if you will—but also use it and live it. That does not mean, though, that in addition to her understanding and know-how the wise person must possess something else that in combination with these then applies the understanding to produce a life in accordance with it. Perhaps being wise just is living a certain way *because* of the understanding and know-how one has; there need be no additional *third* factor that both is part of wisdom and gets from the understanding and know-how to the living of it.

Wisdom does not guarantee success in achieving life's important goals, however, just as a high probability does not guarantee truth. The world must cooperate, too. A wise person will have gone in the right direction, and, if the world thwarts his journey, he will have known how to respond to that too.

For no very good reason, the notion of wisdom seems to find a more congenial place for constraints on feasibility than it does for expansion. Attending to the limits of what is feasible includes knowing three things: first, the negative aspects of the best alternative that is available; second, the value of the next best alternative which has to be forgone or given up in order to do the best—economists

* Whether or not the different components of wisdom are derivable from one single truth, one might try to see them as aspects of one coherent intellectual structure: for example, something analogous to the economists' diagram wherein a person moves to the highest indifference curve bounded by the budget constraints, which contains an ordering of preference or value, including tradeoffs, a knowledge of the limits of what is feasible, and a principle of choice. Other of wisdom's components too might be congenial to structuring within an economic mode of thought (such as the costs of action, level of aspiration, knowledge of alternative actions). However, I do not know of any one integrated structure that illuminatingly includes all the pieces of wisdom.

call this “the opportunity cost”; and third, the limits on possibility themselves, which exclude certain alternatives as possible or feasible objects of choice. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for example, Freud lists among the negative aspects of civilization the suppression of the free exercise of sexual and aggressive instincts, holding that this is the unavoidable price for civilization’s benefits. The combination of the benefits of civilization without the negative aspects is *not* within the feasibility space.

Wisdom’s special penchant for limits seems arbitrarily to favor conservatives over radicals. Pointing to an important and unappreciated constraint can constitute an important piece of wisdom, but why more so than pointing to an important possibility that had mistakenly been thought not to be possible? Why is contracting the domain of feasibility any wiser than expanding it? Those who speak of the limits to economic growth, if they are right, speak wisdom. Another author, Julian Simon, in his book *The Ultimate Resource*, argues that the actual limits are much farther back: the amount of each resource within the physical ball we inhabit, the earth, is vastly greater than the quantities others list as absolute limits, and new technologies can be developed to extract these; exhaustion would come many many centuries hence, long after space flight would make massive migration possible. (I myself am *not* recommending pillaging the earth and then abandoning it! Nor, I assume—except for his thought experiment to show how far back are the physical limits of feasibility—is Simon.) If Simon is right, this too should count as a piece of wisdom, saving us from much unnecessary constriction. If utopian theorists of society are right about how very harmoniously we could live together, that too would be wisdom. There is no reason why wisdom should asymmetrically favor the dour view. Even if some general argument showed that there had been more cost to humanity from mistaken attempts to do the impossible than from mistaken neglecting of what was possible, this would recommend paying special attention to cautions, but not stopping our welcoming of new possibilities.

The notion of wisdom I have described is human-centered; it focuses on what is important in human living. Yet things other than people can have well-being; this includes animals, extraterrestrial rational beings, and perhaps such things as economies, ecological

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systems, societies and civilizations, plants, and some inanimate physical objects too—books, records, clothing, chairs, rivers . . . A more general and generous view of wisdom might therefore see it as knowing each and every thing's well-being, what the dangers are to each thing's well-being, and how these can and should be coped with. (Since portions of ethics are concerned with conflicts among different people's well-being, or people's versus other kinds of well-being, in knowing how these conflicts are to be coped with or resolved, wisdom would encompass those portions of ethics.) A more limited wisdom would be about a particular thing or kind; it would involve knowing *its* well-being, the dangers to it, etc., and such wisdom sometimes is found in particular roles or occupations. Yet a person would not be wise in general who did not know how extensively the notion of well-being applied; he might mistakenly think some particular things did not have any well-being at all, and therefore that there could not be any wisdom about that kind of thing. He would be wise only about people, and even here his wisdom would be limited. In not being able to specify how people should respond to the other things' well-being, he would not be able to specify an appropriate part of human relation to reality—and *that* is part of *human* well-being. Even his wisdom about humans, therefore, would be only partial.

Wisdom can be partial also in the part of human life it is concerned with, as when people are (said to be) wise about specialized areas, one about economic matters, another about foreign affairs, another about raising children, another about waging warfare, another about pursuing an occupation successfully. Common to all these would be their fitting the general notion of *wisdom about* something, in the sense of knowing what is important about it, how to avoid dangers concerning it, etc.; the differences would be in what somethings the wisdom was about. In different social situations or emergencies, we might especially need different portions of wisdom, hence give these portions differing weights. Is there any one kind of thing, then, that constitutes wisdom about life? That last wisdom is not simply a weighting of all the different particular specialized kinds of wisdom. Rather, it is a wisdom about what is common to all of our lives, about what (we judge) it is important for any normal human life to be concerned with. And it is that which we mean when we

speak (simply) of wisdom (period), without specifying any special area the wisdom is about; it is that sense which enables us to say of someone, for instance, that although he may have been wise about business matters he was not a wise person.

Socrates, reputed by the oracle to be the only wise person in Athens, explained this surprising pronouncement by saying that unlike all the others who thought they were wise, he knew he was *not*. He also tried to spread this kind of knowledge to others! Frequently engaging them in conversations about some important notion of common human concern, such as piety or friendship or justice or the good, he led them to contradict themselves or to confess confusion finally. They were unable to define these important notions, to offer an explicit account that applied to all the cases where the intuitive notion applied correctly, and only to those cases, delineating that notion from other ones close by. Socrates concluded from this that they didn't know what piety or justice or friendship was. But does this follow simply from the inability to define or explain the notion? We know what grammatical sentences are without being able, unless we are linguistic theorists, to define the notion of "a grammatical sentence" and correctly delineate the full set of grammatical rules that specify this. We can recognize and reliably produce grammatical sentences and distinguish ungrammatical ones, all by "ear." Similarly, a companion of Socrates could know what friendships were, maintain them, recognize a betrayal of one when he came across it, offer advice to someone about difficulties in friendship, all without being able to define correctly the general notion of friendship.

The knowledge wisdom involves also may be something one can possess without being able to expound explicitly. To be wise, it is not necessary to be able to pass the severe test of being grilled by Socrates, either on the general notion of wisdom or on the particular things one is wise about. This is not to deny that such explicit knowledge and understanding can be valuable and satisfying. Explicit knowledge also might be of help in coping with difficult situations or in teaching someone else some wisdom, yet a particular wise person also might teach by his or her own example or by invoking an appropriate proverb or platitude—knowing which one to invoke when. (The philosopher, however, is someone who is beset by the temptation to say everything explicitly.)

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What thing is it, then, that a wise person will deem *most* important? It is tempting to answer (or to sidestep the issue by saying) that what matters most, the supreme good, is wisdom itself. Its importance as a means is clear; you are far more likely to live rightly if you know what is important and valuable, and also know the dangers and hazards of life and how to cope with them. But even as a means to other good things, wisdom is not strictly necessary. Someone might happen luckily to be pointed toward the important goals, perhaps by social conditioning, without fully understanding their nature and importance; and his own circumstances might be so fortunate that these goals are attained easily without any navigating through dangerous shoals. That lucky person would, through no virtue of his own, gain many particular goods. He would not, however, be living wisely; he would not be exercising his own knowledge and intelligence to shape his life and himself.

What is involved in philosophy's loving wisdom? Of course, it recommends living wisely, seeking more wisdom, esteeming it in others; it holds that wisdom has intrinsic, not merely instrumental, value, and it ranks wisdom highly. But when philosophy loves wisdom, does it love it above all else? Above happiness and above enlightenment? Philosophers frequently have wanted to say that it is wisdom that can bring the greatest happiness, and even that wisdom guarantees this. (Hence the ancients' frequent discussions of the difficult situation of the wise person who is being tortured; see, for example, Cicero's Fifth Tusculan Disputation.) Perhaps they insist wisdom must bring the greatest happiness because they worry that wisdom will be neglected if the two diverge. This neglect would not occur, however, if the goods were ranked in the following order: first, wisdom conjoined with happiness; second, wisdom without happiness; third, happiness without wisdom; and fourth, neither happiness nor wisdom. Add to that the strong tendency of wisdom to produce happiness, and the first becomes more likely than the second. (And since the lack of wisdom often leads eventually to great unhappiness, the third is less likely than may appear.) Wisdom's tendency to produce happiness is due to two things. First, and most obviously, one of its concerns may be how to gain happiness. Second, since wisdom is extremely valuable in itself, possessing it and recognizing that fact will by itself produce deep happiness (unless this is overridden by torture or other such factors).

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When the philosopher loves wisdom, like other lovers, does he too magnify the virtues of his loved one? (And which does a philosopher really love more, wisdom or the loving of wisdom?) When he sings the praises of wisdom and his love of it, is the proper response—as with all happy lovers who pronounce their love fairest of them all—to smile indulgently?

In any case, will not a wisdom which knows the limits of everything also know its own; won't a wisdom which sees everything in proper perspective see itself in perspective too; won't a wisdom which lauds self-knowledge know itself? If something else is more important than wisdom, then wisdom, knowing what is important, should be able to tell us that. There is nothing inconsistent in wisdom's concluding that something else is more important. Nor would the ability to discern that thereby make wisdom most important; a road sign that points to a city is not more important than the city. (Plato used to ask how the lesser could judge the greater; however, it certainly can know enough to recognize the greater as greater.) If wisdom sees something else as more important, to gain more of that thing it may even recommend sacrificing some wisdom or opportunities for it. One level up, then, wisdom would rule supreme. However, even that act of ruling does not make it most important. The Supreme Court ultimately has the power to judge everything else, but this does not make it the most important organ in government; and if political officials hold (legitimate) power over all other activities in the society, this does not make holding and exercising power the society's most important and valuable activity.

It is part of wisdom to understand what things are most important in life and to guide one's life by that; we cannot short-circuit that understanding by announcing simply that the very most important thing is wisdom itself. Yet we can produce reasons for valuing wisdom greatly. One of the most important goods of life, Aristotle held, is internal to living life: being someone with the capacity and tendency to live rightly in a wide range of circumstances, and living by the skillful and wise exercise of that capacity. Wisdom and its exercise also can be an important component of the self, which gains articulation in applying and developing wisdom. Hence, wisdom is not simply an important means to *other* ends but itself is one important end, an intrinsic component of one's life and self.

Moreover, the process of living wisely, pursuing or opening

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oneself to what is important, taking account of a range of circumstances and utilizing one's fullest capacities to steer skillfully through them, is itself a way of being deeply connected to reality. The person who lives wisely connects to reality more thoroughly than someone who moves through life spoon-fed by circumstances, even if what these try to feed is reality. Whether or not he proportionally pursues the full range of reality, he is aware of that range; he knows and appreciates reality's many dimensions and sees the life he is living in that widest context. Such seeing itself is a mode of connection. Living wisely, then, is not just our means of connecting most closely to reality, it also is our way. (This is the central thing I want to say about wisdom.)

Wisdom is not simply knowing how to steer one's way through life, cope with difficulties etc. It also is knowing the *deepest* story, being able to see and appreciate the deepest significance of whatever occurs; this includes appreciating the ramifications of each thing or event for the various dimensions of reality, knowing and understanding not merely the proximate goods but the ultimate ones, and seeing the world in this light. This it is that the philosopher loves, and *its* claim to preeminence is less easily dismissed.

Nevertheless, the principles of wisdom that have been explicitly formulated within the Western tradition, when they are general enough to be widely applicable, are not precise enough to decide by themselves difficult life choices or resolve particular dilemmas. This includes Aristotle's principle of choosing the mean between extremes (which one interpretation sees as recommending responses and emotions that are proportional to the situation—that is, *fitting* ones), Socrates's dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living, and Hillel's statement "If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" When principles of wisdom do specify general types of goals and goods (and recommend general ways of combining them), the guidance they offer is no substitute for judgment and maturity. Nevertheless, such principles can be illuminating; even a simple list of what to take account of in life can be helpful, even when *how* to take account of them is not specified.

Yet why cannot general principles be formulated to apply to each and every situation that yet are precise enough to specify particular

courses of action to be followed in them? It is not enough here to quote Aristotle's dictum that we should not expect more precision than the subject matter admits. (Many writers on many topics since Aristotle have comforted themselves by citing these words, but perhaps only his extraordinarily powerful mind was entitled to confidence about where the limits of precision are located.) Why doesn't the subject of life admit of a more exact understanding? To reply that life itself is fuzzy or vague is no explanation, for, insofar as we can understand that statement, it seems merely to restate the fact to be explained.

I'm not sure of the answer, but there is an analogy to scientific knowledge that seems helpful. One might think that in science a hypothesis can be established or refuted by isolated data (for the time being, at any rate, until new data comes along). However, recent theorists, following Pierre Duhem and W. V. Quine, have emphasized the extent to which the body of scientific knowledge forms an interconnected web, where particular data can be accommodated or discounted depending upon what particular other hypotheses or theories one is willing to adopt or modify. Whether to reject a particular hypothesis, or instead to accept it but make theoretical modifications elsewhere to accommodate apparently conflicting data, depends upon how good the resulting overall theories would be. This would be determined by some measure of the overall goodness of a theory, compared to that of competing theories, taking account of its fit to the data and to the ongoing problem situation, its explanatory power, simplicity, theoretical fruitfulness, and coherence with an existing body of accepted knowledge. Thus far no adequate overall rule has been formulated to incorporate and balance each of the partial evaluative factors thought relevant: In making the overall scientific assessment we must use our intuitive judgment in balancing the diverse subcriteria. (Have we simply not yet found the adequate rule, or is it impossible in principle or beyond our limited intelligence?) But even if one could be formulated, it would assess the overall character of a large theory and therefore would apply only indirectly to a decision about a particular hypothesis, and then only after a long chain of reasoning had taken account of the different possibilities for all the other parts too. That a painting is to be of a horse does not determine what color pigment is to be applied at a

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particular point on the canvas. Moreover, even if an overall criterion in fact determined some particular result—in that no other result actually would be compatible with the criterion—there need be no guarantee that in a given fixed number of steps or amount of time we could apply the criterion to find out which result that was.

About a life too, with its many aspects, domains, portions, and interconnections, perhaps only an overall criterion can be offered—for example, that it is to be contoured somehow to enhance its, and our, relating to reality. There are diverse subcriteria (the various dimensions of reality) that an overall assessment must balance and in this we must use our intuitive judgment; no explicit rule exists to perform that task. The individual is to adapt her life to the overall criterion, but how that is best done will depend upon her characteristics, her current and future opportunities, how she has lived thus far, and the situation of others, as well as on her overall balancing of the subcriteria. Wisdom about life too, as does scientific knowledge, takes a holistic form. There is no formula to learn and apply.

Completely balanced and proportional judgment might inhibit youth's forceful pursuit of partial enthusiasms and great ambitions, through which they are led to intense experiences and large accomplishments. Even an older person with balance need not stay always on the Aristotelian mean; she may follow a zigzag path, now moving with an excessive enthusiasm in this direction, later counterbalancing it with another in the opposite. Her balance may be shown in the direction of the central tendency, and also by the fact that the deviations are not too great for too long and leave no lasting ill effects. Her ability to soon right herself gives the ongoing pattern over time balance, yet in a way that allows and expresses some of youth's romance and passionate excess. Wisdom need not be geriatric.