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Excerpt

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Part I

Approaches to the study of wisdom

1 Understanding wisdom

Robert J. Sternberg

To understand wisdom fully and correctly probably requires more wisdom than any of us have. Thus, we cannot quite comprehend the nature of wisdom because of our own lack of it. But if scientists were to demand total understanding, they would quickly be out of their jobs, because total understanding is something we can fancy we are approaching, but it is almost certainly not something we can ever achieve. And if we are to believe the authors of the chapters in this book, the recognition that total understanding will always elude us is itself a sign of wisdom.

The chapter authors take a number of different approaches to understanding wisdom. Any attempt to classify these approaches is bound to be an oversimplification, and a rather gross one at that. Yet, in order to give readers at least a rough lay of the land, I have sought to divide the book into five parts, the middle three of which represent three distinctive, although overlapping, approaches to understanding wisdom and the first and last of which respectively serve to introduce and to integrate the three approaches. The three approaches draw on philosophical, folk, and psychodevelopmental views of wisdom, respectively.

Part I, Approaches to the Study of Wisdom, comprises just the present chapter, chapter 1, which sets the stage for “understanding wisdom.” This chapter describes the three main approaches used by authors of this book in understanding wisdom and briefly summarizes the main contents of each chapter.

Part II of the book describes work drawing primarily on philosophical conceptions of wisdom. This part comprises three chapters.

Chapter 2, “Wisdom through the Ages,” by Daniel N. Robinson, is the only chapter in the book where an author was given an explicit “assignment,” in this case, to provide a brief history of philosophical views on wisdom. Robinson begins with Socrates in the 5th century B.C. and ends with the interpreters of Kant in the 19th century A.D. Robinson notes that the Platonic *Dialogues* provide the first comprehensive analysis of wisdom. Wisdom is here viewed as taking three forms: as a special gift of the philosopher and those who pursue truth; as the practical gift of statesmen and lawgivers; and as the

gift of those who pursue scientific knowledge of the nature of things. These three aspects of wisdom continue to be seen in present-day accounts of the nature of the construct.

Chapter 3, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Kevin Rathunde, also views wisdom in terms of three aspects, although the three aspects do not directly correspond to Plato's. In "The Psychology of Wisdom: An Evolutionary Interpretation," the authors suggest an approach to the study of wisdom that they refer to as "evolutionary hermeneutics." This approach is based on the idea that historically used concepts relating to the evaluation of human behavior, including wisdom, are likely to have adaptive value for humankind. The goal of the authors, then, is to understand how wisdom has been understood through the ages, particularly in the philosophical literature but also in psychology and elsewhere. First, wisdom can be understood as a cognitive process used in attempts to understand the world in a disinterested way, seeking the ultimate causes and consequences of events while preserving the integration of knowledge. Wisdom can also be understood as a virtue providing a compelling guide to action. Through wisdom, it becomes possible to improve our lives by understanding how better to order our actions so as to achieve closer harmony with the laws of the physical universe. Third, wisdom can be understood as a personal good, that is, as an intrinsically rewarding experience that provides high enjoyment and happiness when a person reflects on the connection between events in a disinterested way. Through these three aspects, wisdom provides a major mechanism of cultural evolution and an alternative to extrinsic rewards based on pleasure and materialism.

In chapter 4, "Wisdom as Integrated Thought: Historical and Developmental Perspectives," Gisela Labouvie-Vief draws heavily on two modes of thought suggested by the ancient Greeks: *mythos* and *logos*. In the former mode, *mythos*, experience is holistic and based on a bond of close identification between the self and the object of thought. Thought and the thinker, knower and the known, merge into a single, indivisible unit. The meaning of experience derives from this integration. Thus, integration plays an important role in Labouvie-Vief's conception of wisdom, as it does in Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde's. In the latter mode, *logos*, meaning is disembedded from a reality of flux and change and is related instead to stable systems of categorization. It is embedded in that part of knowledge that is arguable and that can be demonstrated and defined with precision and agreement. In *logos*, knowledge can be rendered in a way that is mechanistic and computable. Labouvie-Vief suggests that wisdom is grounded in *mythos*, whereas much of our society is grounded in *logos*, the mode of thought that has come to be associated with scientific thinking. Labouvie-Vief believes her notion of wisdom to be closely related to Plato's in asserting the essential compatibility of the abstract with the concrete and the theoretical with the practical. We cannot

Understanding wisdom

5

find wisdom in a disembedded theory of abstract or hypotheticodeductive thought.

Part IV of the book contains four chapters drawing heavily upon folk conceptions of wisdom. None of these chapters rely exclusively upon such conceptions. Rather, they use these conceptions in the way they should be used: to serve as a basis for the formulation of explicit psychological theories. Folk conceptions are thus a springboard for theory rather than the final theory in and of themselves.

Chapter 5, by Paul B. Baltes and Jacqui Smith, draws upon the large program of theory and research instigated some years back by Baltes to understand intellectual functioning and its development. In their chapter, "Toward a Psychology of Wisdom and Its Ontogenesis," Baltes and Smith draw upon Baltes's dual process framework of intelligence, according to which intelligence is understood in terms of basic mechanics of information processing and in terms of knowledge-rich pragmatics. The former is largely content free, universal and biological, and susceptible to genetic differences. The latter is largely content rich, culture dependent, and experience based. They view the latter, pragmatic aspect of intelligence as most relevant to wisdom, which they define as expertise in the domain of fundamental life pragmatics, such as life planning, management, and review. Wise persons are viewed as having exceptional insight into human development and life matters and as having exceptionally good judgment, advice, and commentary about difficult life problems. Five criteria for assessing wisdom are rich factual knowledge about matters of life, rich procedural knowledge about life problems, knowledge about the contexts of life and their relationships, knowledge about differences in values and priorities, and knowledge about the relative indeterminacy and unpredictability of life. They describe a series of studies supporting their view, particularly studies of people's folk conceptions of wisdom done in their laboratory and others'. They pool the data from various folk studies in support of their view. Two of the supporting folk-conceptual data sets are those of Chandler and Holliday and of Sternberg, whose contributions form the next two chapters.

Chapter 6, by Michael J. Chandler with Stephen Holliday, reviews a number of conceptions of wisdom, including Baltes's. Chandler and Holliday do not interpret their data in the same way as do Baltes and Smith, and indeed, the former authors are critical of the conception of Baltes and Smith, believing it too much to emphasize expertise, which they believe can narrow rather than broaden people's visions of what is wise, and too much to emphasize an abstract good that may not work in real-life contexts. Drawing on their own data on folk conceptions of wisdom, Chandler and Holliday suggest as key elements of wisdom exceptional understanding, judgment and communication skills, and general competence.

Chapter 7, by Robert J. Sternberg, also draws upon a study of folk conceptions of wisdom. The chapter, “Wisdom and Its Relations to Intelligence and Creativity,” describes a study rather different from other studies in that it compares conceptions of wisdom with those of intelligence and creativity and also draws upon subjects not only from the lay population but also from a population of professors of art, business, philosophy, and physics. Multi-dimensional scaling of the lay data revealed six basic elements in folk conceptions of wisdom: reasoning ability, sagacity, learning from ideas and environment, judgment, expeditious use of information, and perspicacity. Wisdom was most distinguished from intelligence in the dimension of sagacity. These data form the backdrop for a theory of wisdom that involves multiple elements, including aspects of knowledge, information processing, intellectual style, personality, motivation, and environmental context. It is argued that these elements can be used to distinguish behavior that is prototypically wise from behavior that is prototypically intelligent or prototypically creative.

Chapter 8, by Lucinda Orwoll and Marion Perlmutter, deals with wisdom and the study of wise persons. These authors suggest that wisdom is relatively rare because it entails exceptional personality development as well as exceptional cognitive functioning. Thus, for these authors, advanced cognitive development is necessary but not sufficient for wisdom to be displayed. The wise individual is not only smart, but also has a personality structure that enables him or her to transcend personal needs, thoughts, and feelings. These investigators propose an empirical approach to studying wisdom that involves an intensive study of adults who are considered wise. Such adults are selected on the basis of nominations, which in turn depend upon folk conceptions of wisdom and who is nominated on the basis of these conceptions. The authors also compare results of three studies of folk conceptions of wisdom – those of Clayton and Birren, Sternberg, and Holliday and Chandler, which they view as supporting their dual cognitive–personality conception of wisdom.

Part IV of the book contains chapters that emphasize psychodevelopmental approaches to understanding wisdom. The five chapters in this part draw upon a diversity of developmental theories.

Chapter 9, by John A. Meacham, is an outlier by any standard. In his chapter, “The Loss of Wisdom,” Meacham suggests that wisdom may decrease, rather than increase, with age – a position taken, at least explicitly, by none of the other contributors to the book. Meacham views wisdom in terms of one’s knowledge that one doesn’t know. The wise person is one who appreciates the fallibility of knowledge. He or she balances knowledge, on the one hand, with doubting, on the other, thereby avoiding the extremes of too-confident knowing and of too-cautious doubting. Wisdom lies not in what a person knows, but rather in how the person uses the knowledge he or she has. It is an attitude toward knowledge as well as toward beliefs, values, and skills. Meacham believes that in addition to this attitude, wisdom involves

Understanding wisdom

7

varying degrees of profundity. One can be wise in a relatively simple domain, but such wisdom is ultimately less impressive than wisdom in a more profound domain.

Chapter 10, by Karen Strohm Kitchener and Helene G. Brenner, draws upon Kitchener's Reflective Judgment model, a model of adult cognitive development. The chapter, "Wisdom and Reflective Judgment: Knowing in the Face of Uncertainty," views wisdom as an advanced stage of intellectual development. Wisdom, according to the proposed model, comprises four aspects:

1. a recognition of the presence of unavoidably difficult and inherently thorny problems that confront all adults;
2. a comprehensive grasp of knowledge that is characterized by both breadth and depth of understanding;
3. a recognition that knowledge is uncertain and that it is not possible for truth to be absolutely knowable at any given time; and
4. a willingness and exceptional ability to formulate sound, executable judgments in the face of life's uncertainties.

All of these aspects are present in other models, but the present model is a unique integration of the four particular aspects. Kitchener's work is unusual in that it involves a measurement scale – the Reflective Judgment Interview – that can measure levels of thought and particularly the highest level, which Kitchener and Brenner see as prerequisite for wisdom.

Chapter 11, by Patricia Kennedy Arlin, is similar to chapter 10 in its drawing upon a stage model of the development of thought. But whereas Kitchener has postulated reflective judgment as the final stage, Arlin has postulated problem finding as the final stage in her model. Arlin suggests that wisdom is a function not of the answers one reaches but of the questions one poses. In "Wisdom: The Art of Problem Finding," Arlin suggests that wisdom and problem finding, although not identical, are highly related. Shared between them are

1. preoccupation with questions rather than answers,
2. the search for complementarity among points of view,
3. the detection of asymmetry in the face of evidence implying symmetry and equilibrium,
4. openness to change, pushing of the limits and possible redefinition of those limits,
5. a sense of taste for problems that are of fundamental importance, and
6. preference for certain conceptual directions.

In chapter 12, "An Essay on Wisdom: Toward Organismic Processes that Make It Possible," Juan Pascual-Leone takes what he refers to as a dialectical-constructivist perspective on wisdom, in particular, and on cognitive development, in general. He views wisdom as a complex state category of a domain he calls vital reasoning. Wisdom is the state reached by an individual when the interrelations and dialectical integrations (i.e., resolutions of contradictions) across all and any of the vital domains of that person's life have attained

a critical mass wherein new qualitative principles of integration across various domains have emerged. What might some examples of these qualitative principles be? Pascual-Leone suggests three principles:

1. Wisdom causes the expert counselor to adopt a paradoxical attitude that fosters freedom while stressing the authority of reason and reasonable tradition.
2. Wisdom involves restricting one's interventions on others and on the world to those needed to restore harmonious relations among others and among elements of the world.
3. Wisdom involves dialectical integration of one's soul with one's agency in the world.

Here, as in the other chapters in this part of the book, wisdom is viewed as part of the unfolding of a developmental process, in this case, one in which a dialectical view of the world and one's role in it is finally reached.

Chapter 13, by Deirdre Kramer, sets a framework for conceptualizing wisdom based on the primacy of affect–cognition relations. Like Orwell and Perlmutter, Kramer views the integration of affect and cognition as central to wisdom. Kramer suggests that there are five key wisdom-related processes:

1. recognition of individuality,
2. recognition of context,
3. ability to interact effectively,
4. understanding of change and growth, and
5. attention to affect and cognition.

Wisdom enables an individual to adapt to the tasks of adult life, such as choosing a career, developing an intimate relationship, raising children, and in general, adjusting to the stressors of adult life. In particular, it allows individuals to solve problems confronting themselves, to advise others, to manage social institutions, to review their own lives, and to introspect spiritually.

Part V contains a single chapter, chapter 14, by James E. Birren and Laurel M. Fisher, which serves to integrate the other chapters in this book. This chapter points out common as well as unique features of the various accounts of wisdom and suggests directions in which future theory and research might lead us.

I believe that readers of this book will find themselves well-educated regarding both contemporary and historical views of the nature of wisdom. I also believe they have another treat in store for them. Many edited books contain sets of independent chapters by authors who are unaware of (or unwilling to cite) each other's work, and of the relations of their work to that of other investigators in the field. This book represents an effort pretty close to the opposite end of the spectrum: Authors are obviously well-acquainted with each other's work and cite each other extensively. Moreover, they point out the interrelations of their views, so that interweaving of the contributions is not left for the final, integrative chapter. Some editors might have been

Understanding wisdom

9

inclined to edit out the extensive intercitation to conserve space and reduce redundancy. I have maintained it, because I believe that whatever redundancy may result is more than compensated for by the cross-fertilization of ideas that occurs precisely because authors have been so generous and assiduous in analyzing how their own ideas relate to those of others.

Part II

**Approaches informed by philosophical
conceptions of wisdom**

2 Wisdom through the ages

Daniel N. Robinson

In this brief historical review of the topic of wisdom, selectivity is not only unavoidable but also unavoidably arbitrary. The subject forms perhaps the major chapter in the history of philosophy where it is often inextricably joined to political, moral, and jural matters. It is also both the aim and the target of various literary genres, of scripture, meditation, and the saintly ways of life. Most of this falls beyond the editor's expectations, not to mention the author's gifts. A manageable alternative, and the one adopted here, calls for a summary of the teachings of the major philosophers and their disciples or schools and the extent to which these teachings have found or might have found a place within that "mental science" of the 19th century that has now matured into "cognitive science."

Socrates (469?–399 B.C.)

Long before the advent of genuinely philosophical modes of analysis and inquiry there was a prosperous folk philosophy contained in the epic poems attributed to Homer, epics that imposed a discernible pattern on the thoughts and perspectives of the more influential teachers in Hellenic and Hellenistic Greece. I have dealt with this at greater length elsewhere (Robinson, 1989), but the main points should be noted.

It is a feature of epic literature to teach lessons and to explain the causes of things through the medium of a story. Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are, of course, not merely tales of adventure. They are punctuated with folk theories of motivation, personality, the role and the limits of reason, and the power of the gods and of the fates in relation to human affairs. The early Greeks, like even the most primitive communities, had a conception of soul or spirit. Unlike most primitive communities – unlike even the advanced civilizations that preceded them – these same Greeks externalized their conceptions and made them topics first of epic poems, then of dramatic literature, and finally of philosophical analysis.

In the matter of wisdom, Homeric psychology is at once dualistic and exclusionary. Animals are endowed with souls but not with *noos* (later to be