

A Theory of Wisdom as the Desire and Ability to Question Beliefs

Yaroslav Riabinin

Introduction

The subject of wisdom in human cognition has been largely ignored by psychologists in the last century. Hence, research on the topic is understandably scarce and tentative. Despite these unfortunate circumstances, however, many recent studies on the nature and origin of wisdom have successfully illuminated various aspects of this ancient mystery. These results can serve as a basis for future investigations, as they provide diverse and often detailed accounts of wisdom. In this paper, I will examine several existing theories and integrate them into a broader and more cohesive whole, while at the same time considering the role of foolishness in the study of wisdom.

The theoretical framework that I propose relies heavily on issues concerning knowledge and epistemic boundaries. It can be divided into two distinct parts that I will call “desire” and “ability”, which are in a complementary relationship with each other – both are necessary for a genuine manifestation of wisdom and neither is sufficient on its own. The first component deals with a person’s general attitude towards knowledge – namely, one’s awareness of its fallibility and one’s recognition of the uncertainty of human existence. This realization should then foster a *desire* to question beliefs in a Socratic fashion, so as to avoid foolishness that results from overconfidence and failure to critically examine incoming information. By itself this is not enough, however, and one must also have the *ability* to properly evaluate beliefs. This involves two sub-components: expertise in making wise judgments and applying prior insight to novel situations, as well as learning from experience and extracting valuable lessons from daily life. All of these elements will be discussed in the following sections, starting with the underlying principles of epistemic wisdom.

Knowledge and Wisdom

It is my primary contention that wisdom requires more than simply acquiring information, storing it in memory, and recalling it at will. One must possess a deeper

understanding of the origins and limitations of human knowledge. The uncertainty of life must be recognized and accepted, so that one can adopt a skeptical and inquisitive stance towards physical reality. It is this fundamental attitude that allows one to avoid arrogance and imprudence, which is the first step to attaining wisdom. In order to elaborate on these ideas, I will consider a number of relevant articles that contain a treatment of knowledge that strongly supports my views.

Philosophical Foundations

In a historical review entitled “Wisdom through the ages”, Daniel Robinson explores the philosophical foundations of wisdom in a chronological order. It is not surprising that he begins his investigation in ancient Greece. The Platonic dialogues offer a basic conception of wisdom: “There is wisdom as *sophia*, the special gift of the philosopher and of those in general who have devoted themselves to a contemplative life in pursuit of truth” (Robinson, pg. 14). For the Socratics, this definition of wisdom was central. According to them, it is not enough to possess a high level of intelligence, but one must be a “certain kind of person” that questions cemented beliefs and refuses to accept social dogma. That is why they believed a wise person is one who “searches for the timeless and unchanging truths, never content with the shifting phenomena of the material world” (pg. 15). The theory that I advocate in this paper rests on these Socratic principles, where wisdom consists of knowing that one knows nothing and of leading a life of reflection and contemplation.

The Fallibility of Knowledge

John Meacham puts forward very similar ideas about knowledge in a piece entitled “The loss of wisdom”. He devotes much of the article to a discussion of cognitive epistemology and summarizes his position in the following statement: “I have concluded that the essence of wisdom is to hold the attitude that knowledge is fallible and to strive for a balance between

knowing and doubting” (Meacham, pg. 181). He emphasizes that mere accumulation of knowledge will inevitably lead to overconfidence and foolish action. Instead, we must pose questions and raise doubts about the world, but we must do so without subscribing to extreme skepticism. What he means by that is the following: “To be wise is not to know particular facts but to know without excessive confidence or excessive cautiousness” (pg. 186). Maintaining this delicate balance is what a wise person excels at, according to Meacham. His findings directly correspond to my own claims regarding knowledge and its fallibility, as well as the importance of finding a middle ground between two extremes.

The Difference between Wisdom and Intelligence

In an article entitled “Wisdom and its relations to intelligence and creativity”, Robert Sternberg offers an explicit-theoretical account of wisdom and compares it with intelligence and creativity. Since the three concepts share many overlapping characteristics, Sternberg attempts to differentiate them by introducing six background variables: knowledge, cognitive processing, intellectual style, personality, motivation, and environmental context. For the purposes of this paper, only the first variable – knowledge – will be examined in more detail. More specifically, it is important to consider how wisdom differs from intelligence in that aspect. It seems that a familiar pattern emerges – wisdom is viewed as a deeper understanding of the presuppositions and limitations of knowledge. As Sternberg puts it, a wise person is “someone who *probes inside knowledge* – who understands the meaning of what is known” (Sternberg, pg. 152). By contrast, he claims that an intelligent person is “someone who is able to *recall, analyze, and use knowledge*” (pg. 152). Hence, the distinction is clear – wisdom consists of a balance that is similar to the one proposed by Meacham. We must seek truth and strive to understand the world, while at the same time welcoming ambiguity and recognizing our own epistemic limitations. Intelligence, on the other hand, does not entail a desire to question beliefs, but rather to acquire information and to use it, which is not sufficient for avoiding foolishness and attaining wisdom.

Uncertainty and Judgment

Karen Kitchener and Helene Brenner also address the issue of knowledge in an article entitled “Wisdom and Reflective Judgment: knowing in the face of uncertainty”. They propose a model in which real-world problem solving and judgment are considered to be the central characteristics of wisdom (Kitchener & Brenner, pg. 212). Such decision-making ability is difficult to achieve, however, and it requires “a recognition of the limits of personal knowledge, an acknowledgement of the general uncertainty that characterizes human knowing, and a humility about one’s own judgments in the face of such limitations” (pg. 226). This claim is certainly consistent with the views I advocate and with those of other scholars mentioned previously. Moreover, Kitchener and Brenner distinguish wisdom from intelligence in a manner that is similar to Sternberg’s. They claim that wisdom deals with situations involving uncertainty and that it is “generally uncalled for when faced with well-structured problems” (pg 226). In other words, it takes more than simply finding logical solutions to routine tasks, or *using* and *recalling* knowledge, as is the case with intelligence. Instead, wisdom requires realizing that knowledge is fallible and uncertain, which allows you to cope with the trials and tribulations of adult life.

An Integrated View of Wisdom

Finally, in a piece entitled “The elements of wisdom: overview and integration”, James Birren and Laurel Fisher examine and describe a series of articles that deal with wisdom, based on which they formulate their own account of the cognitive phenomenon. They arrive at the following conclusion: “Wisdom is the *integration of the affective, conative, and cognitive aspects* of human abilities in response to life’s tasks and problems” (Birren & Fisher, pg. 326). The feature that is relevant to our discussion is the “cognitive” dimension, which directly concerns knowledge. The authors claim that a wise person is one who is able to achieve a balance between knowing and doubting as one is faced with challenges and as one gains new

experience. This conviction is undoubtedly reminiscent of the views put forward by Meacham and Sternberg, as well as the position that I adopt in this paper. The consequences of holding such an attitude towards knowledge – that it is fallible, uncertain, and so forth – are considered in the following section.

Wisdom as Overcoming Foolishness

In a previous essay entitled “An Account of Foolishness as Improper Belief Formation”, I attempted to explain the cognitive mechanisms underlying foolishness by examining the process of belief acquisition. Rather than discussing already formed attitudes that may lead to self-defeating behaviour - or something equally detrimental to our lives - I hypothesized that failure at the level of belief evaluation can cause us to behave foolishly as well. The general idea is that people have a strong tendency to minimize cognitive effort in order to lead simpler lives and they often strive to alleviate the responsibility they have for their own actions. This desire can cause individuals to designate “authority figures”, which they trust blindly, or rely on popular opinion and the cemented beliefs of society as a whole. Depending on how severe this reliance has become, the person may exhibit “negligence” by ignoring the suspicion that a belief may be incorrect, or “indoctrination”, which means disregarding even the very basic evaluation procedures. The result is a possession of beliefs that do not belong in the mental repository, had they been evaluated properly. This may lead someone to act in an unusual and inconsistent manner, which could be considered “foolish”.

Given this framework of foolishness, as well as the attitude towards knowledge that was described earlier, it is possible to define wisdom as the product of overcoming foolishness by examining beliefs rigorously before accepting them. The recognition of our epistemic limitations and of life’s uncertainty can produce in us a *desire* to question the knowledge that we acquire, which involves evaluating beliefs at some point. Hence, a wise person understands the nature of foolishness and does not allow oneself to become dependent on authority or society, so as to

avoid acquiring false or inconsistent beliefs. Such a contemplative existence is difficult to achieve, however, since one must be *able* to make adequate judgments by drawing on prior insight. Moreover, this insight must first be obtained, which requires learning from one's own experience and from that of other people. This issue of "ability" will be discussed next.

Wisdom in Belief Evaluation

As mentioned previously, the mere possession of a skeptical attitude towards knowledge is not sufficient for wisdom. One must also have the skills necessary to make good judgments regarding which beliefs to acquire. This matter is far from trivial and deserves attention, since very few people actually succeed at making wise decisions on a regular basis, regardless of how willing they are to question knowledge. The problem seems to be in converting general intuitions about how one should evaluate beliefs into real expertise. For example, one could be aware of the criteria involved in assessing incoming information – truth, justifiability, consistency, coherence, and so on – but one could still be inept at using those criteria to reach conclusions. Hence, my claim is that such declarative knowledge does not entail wisdom and one must train the cognitive mechanism of belief evaluation in order to avoid foolishness. I will now examine research that supports my contention and discuss the process of belief acquisition in greater detail.

Reflective Judgment

In the same article discussed earlier, Kitchener and Brenner present a model of adult cognitive development – the "Reflective Judgment" model – which they use to illuminate the nature of wisdom and its attributes. The aspect that is currently relevant to us is the final (fourth) one, which is described as "a willingness and exceptional ability to formulate sound, executable judgments in the face of this uncertainty" (Kitchener & Brenner, pg. 213). Moreover, this ability is closely linked with a person's epistemic assumptions. The authors provide a chart that

documents how beliefs are justified when given certain ideas about what can be known and to what degree of certainty. For example, they claim that the stage closest to wisdom is when knowledge is viewed as being “constructed via the process of reasonable inquiry into generalizable conjectures about the problem at hand” (pg. 218). From this it follows that “beliefs are justified probabilistically via evidence and argument using generalizable criteria” (pg. 218). Hence, Kitchener and Brenner clearly regard the process of evaluating beliefs as a central component of wisdom.

Expert Knowledge System

Baltes and Smith also express similar views in their article entitled “Toward a psychology of wisdom and its ontogenesis”. According to them, wisdom is an expert knowledge system. More specifically, they define it as “a highly developed body of factual and procedural knowledge and judgment dealing with what we call the ‘fundamental pragmatics of life’” (Baltes & Smith, pg. 87). They identify five criteria that are used in making good judgments about important but uncertain matters of life: rich factual knowledge, rich procedural knowledge, life span contextualism, relativism, and uncertainty. The details of these elements are not as important as the recognition of the position adopted by Baltes and Smith – they view wisdom as expertise in evaluating beliefs and solving problems that one encounters daily.

Relevance Realization

In order to adequately assess new information, one must already possess some prior experience and insight, which allows one to form opinions and make judgments. However, there is also a question of how to decide which knowledge to apply to a given situation. There seems to be no clear set of instructions that one can follow to make this decision. For example, consider the simple, or at least common, task of evaluating a belief that your friend is reliable and trustworthy. Although you may have accumulated a large amount of experience by interacting

with this person over the years, there is no indicator as to what subset of this knowledge can or should be used for your present purposes. It appears that there must exist a cognitive mechanism that is in charge of determining which information is relevant, given a specific context. It is precisely this component that links static knowledge to dynamic decision-making, which makes it vital to our cognitive functioning. Hence, I believe that further research on this topic should be conducted.

Automating the Process

Finally, it must be the goal of every wise person to automate the functioning of their belief evaluation mechanism as much as possible. The reason for this is rather obvious – the quicker and more effortlessly we assess beliefs, the more time we have for other things, such as attending to matters of greater complexity and importance. The sheer amount of cognitive processing that our brain must handle is staggering, so it is not always feasible to consciously examine every detail of our existence. We must often conduct a brief and largely subconscious inspection of an incoming belief, which increases the risk of acquiring attitudes that lead to foolishness. Hence, wisdom consists of automating the belief screening mechanism in order to reduce cognitive effort, as well as constantly working to improve its quality and accuracy. Next, I will consider the second element involved in the ability to make wise judgments - learning from experience.

Wisdom as Learning from Experience

This last component of wisdom deals with the accumulation of insight, which allows one to start evaluating beliefs in a sensible and prudent manner. Moreover, I believe it is reasonable to assert that the expertise described in the previous section would lose most of its value if there was no basic operational knowledge to work with. It appears that we make judgments by drawing parallels between the current situation and our prior experiences. We apply what we

have learned to novel circumstances to gain further insight and we continue this way in a cyclical fashion. Hence, my claim is that wisdom consists of extracting relevant lessons from life experiences and accumulating a database of knowledge that can be accessed when evaluating new beliefs. I will now elaborate on this process and discuss several studies that address the role of age in wisdom.

Degrees of Wisdom

There are two primary methods of acquiring insight: learning from one's own experiences, and from those of other people. For example, one could conclude that playing with fire is dangerous after having been burned, but one could also observe someone else feeling pain and arrive at the same conclusion. Therefore, it could be claimed that a wise person is one who employs both strategies and extracts valuable lessons from the experiences of others, in addition to their own. A moderately wise person, then, is someone who only gains insight from one of the two sources. Lastly, it follows that an individual who doesn't learn at all could be called unwise, or foolish.

The Age-Wisdom Correlation

Given that wisdom is in part a product of accumulated experience, it would be appropriate here to consider the widespread belief that only older individuals are wise. Birren and Fisher raise this issue in their article as well, summarizing it in the following statement: "Generally, it is accepted that wisdom develops over time, that older people are wiser than younger people" (Birren & Fisher, pg. 326). According to the theory I put forward in this paper, there is no necessary correlation between age and wisdom. This means that someone who is twenty years old could conceivably be far more sagacious than someone who is seventy. The reason is that people often extract different lessons from the same experiences, let alone from unique life encounters. However, it must be noted that if two people somehow possess identical

learning patterns, then age may play a larger role. Simply put, it provides you with more learning opportunities, from which you can gain valuable insight and thus get closer to wisdom. Birren and Fisher come to the same conclusion, claiming that wisdom “tends to increase with experience and therefore age but is not exclusively found in old age” (pg. 326). Similarly, Baltes and Smith also discuss age in their research: “However, because we define wisdom as expert knowledge about the nature of human development and the human condition, we expect that the acquisition and maintenance of wisdom is facilitated by living longer” (Baltes & Smith, pg. 113).

Not every scholar shares these views, though. For example, John Meacham argues that wisdom is actually *lost* with age. He justifies his claim in the following manner: “Our experience presents the greatest threat to our wisdom, particularly when it leads merely to the accumulation of information, to success, and to power” (Meacham, pg. 209). What he means is that with age and experience one is more likely to disregard the belief that knowledge is fallible, which leads to overconfidence and eventually to foolishness. He is rather skeptical about the intellectual growth associated with age in general, declaring that only a “limited and unique set of experiences can be helpful toward maintaining or restoring wisdom” (pg. 209).

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined various theories of wisdom and proposed my own account that is primarily focused on epistemic issues. The general framework I have outlined consists of both the desire to question knowledge and the ability to make adequate judgments. Moreover, wisdom could be seen as the process of overcoming foolishness by rigorously evaluating beliefs before accepting them. This causes one to lead a life of reflection and contemplation, just as Socrates once did, and it involves holding the attitude that knowledge is fallible and fundamentally uncertain. Once such a belief is adopted, one can strive to accumulate insight and apply it to novel situations in order to make wise decisions in the face of life’s difficulties. Although this model of wisdom is rather abstract and theoretical, it certainly has pragmatic value

as well, since one can benefit enormously from recognizing the ambiguity of human existence and learning to cope with it in a manner that maximizes one's intellectual utility.

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