

A Virtue Theory of Wisdom

Thomas Lombardo, Ph.D.

Throughout human history and across human cultures there have been a host of different theories of wisdom, often selectively highlighting certain key human traits and capacities. Reviewing this literature, which is very extensive, one can nonetheless identify certain common themes. Copthorne Macdonald identified forty-eight human qualities that have been connected with wisdom (<http://www.wisdompage.com/WisdomCharacteristics.html>); Robert Sternberg (1990, 1998, 2005) (as editor of a number of books on wisdom) provided various comparative lists and tables of approaches to wisdom, identifying key ideas associated with each approach; and Richard Trowbridge (<http://www.wisdompage.com/wisresearch00.html>) created a thoroughly researched review of historical theories of wisdom, including a good deal of comparative analysis. Finally, Leland Beaumont (<http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Wisdom>) has an online course on wisdom in which he identifies key qualities of wisdom. Hence, there is a rich data pool, including integrative studies, from which to synthesize a general theory of wisdom.

Based on my ongoing study of wisdom writings and resources, such as those mentioned above, my present working definition of wisdom is the following:

“Wisdom is the highest expression of self-development and future consciousness. It is the continually evolving understanding of and fascination with the big picture of life, of what is important, ethical, and meaningful, and the desire and creative capacity to apply this understanding to enhance the good life, both for oneself and others.”

Right off the bat, I want to highlight that I see wisdom as having a future-focused dimension. Wisdom needs to face forward. Wisdom works toward creating a positive future. As I have phrased it, “Wisdom connects the heritage and lessons of the past with the thoughtfulness, openness, and creativity needed for the future. Wisdom involves an expansive synthesis of temporal consciousness—the big picture of time—combating the excessive narrow “presentism” of today.” (In this sense, I disagree with those who emphasize the idea that wisdom focuses on the present.) I would argue that wisdom is the highest expression of future consciousness. (Lombardo, 2009, 2010, 2011)

Along with the future focus of wisdom, there is the question of how one defines the “good life,” for this is what wisdom seeks and attempts to realize. The view I have recently come to is that what defines the good life is “to flourish.” Linking the good life with flourishing provides us with a dynamic, growth-oriented, future-focused concept of the good.

So, how does one realize this general capacity of wisdom, at least as I have defined it? It seems to me that one can identify a core set of capacities and character virtues that, when taken together, constitute the main features of wisdom. These capacities and virtues facilitate flourishing now and into the future, both for oneself and others. And these capacities and virtues, with focus, effort, and practice, can be strengthened or developed.

I have distilled down the list of wisdom virtues to thirteen items. Self-awareness and self-responsibility combine to make the first virtue, since together they are foundational to the realization of any of the other virtues. All virtues are accomplishments based the belief and enactment of self-responsibility; self-responsibility, in turn, requires self-awareness. Equally important as a foundational virtue is realistic idealism. One must believe in standards of excellence and the distinction between good and bad, or virtue and vice, and act upon these beliefs, or else the ideals of virtue and the good neither make any sense nor generate any motivational impetus.

So here's the list:

1. **Self-Awareness and Self-Responsibility:** A deep and accurate understanding of oneself; the capacity to self-reflect upon and assess one's conscious states and general personality and traits--the capacity of self-reflectivity; self-honesty; self-control (involving willpower), whereby one has the capacity to direct both consciousness and behavior toward desired or intended ends; recognizing and acknowledging oneself as the ultimate cause of one's conscious states, behavior, and life situation; and seeing the power within oneself to change oneself or one's life situation--the opposite of perceived helplessness. Encompasses internal locus of control and self-efficacy.
2. **Realistic Idealism:** The informed and thoughtful belief in and pursuit of the ideal and the good; the informed and thoughtful belief in standards of excellence and the distinction between virtue and vice—presupposed in the aspiration toward virtue; the informed and thoughtful belief in and practice of standards pertaining to learning, knowing, and thinking; the informed and thoughtful belief in the possibility of defining progress or improvement—presupposed in optimism; and the opposite of nihilism and relativism.
3. **Self-Growth:** The belief in and pursuit of psychological growth and improvement; the aspiration toward and realization of self-transcendence; a deep sense of transformation and directionality in one's life and personal identity; the experience of life as a journey; an inspiring self-narrative, including an inspiring and efficacious ideal future self-narrative. Embedded within a general motivational disposition toward adventure and life transformation, as opposed to personal lethargy, rigid stability, and protective security.
4. **Love of Learning:** Curiosity and exploratory motivation; intrinsic motivation to learn (learning is experienced as a positive emotional state); the love of and motivation to acquire knowledge; valuing and pursuing truth; the pursuit of deep learning (learning that transforms fundamental beliefs, mindsets, or perceived self-identity); the pursuit of enlightenment (holistic insight); wonder, fascination, openness, and humility in the

face of existence; and a deep desire and capacity to stay informed of contemporary issues and innovative thinking and ideas.

5. Love of Thinking: The desire and capacity to reflect and evaluate; seeing the value in thinking and self-reflection; motivation to “use ones mind” and positive emotional states associated with this activity; the pursuit and development of multi-faceted thinking skills and modes of understanding, including, but not necessarily limited to, analytical linear logic/rationality and holistic insight or intuition; aspiring to and practicing the standards and virtues of critical thinking and reflective thinking; and the love and exercise of wisdom.
6. Expansive Temporal Consciousness: A broad and informed temporal knowledge of human and natural history; an informed and rich understanding of the trends and possibilities of the future; a capacity to synthesize knowledge of the past with the possibilities of the future—to apply the past to the future; an informed and inspiring grand narrative of humanity, nature, and the cosmos; and the capacity to deeply connect one’s self-narrative with one’s grand narrative. The opposite of presentism, the inclination or motivation to focus on the present.
7. Cosmic Consciousness: Coupled together with expansive temporal consciousness, the motivated acquisition of “big picture” knowledge; a sense of the universe (the totality of everything) and one’s place within it; the opposite of localism and egocentrism; includes both global and ecological awareness; seeing the connection and interdependency of all things—of oneself, other people, the world, and the universe as a whole; a consequent moral sense of reciprocity and justice (in opposition to self-centeredness, selfishness, or excessive self-importance); and transcendence, as a dedication to a higher good or more encompassing reality beyond the self.
8. Hope and Courage: Enthusiasm and positive emotional vitality about the future; approach motivation, as opposed to avoidance/escape motivation; the capacity to see positive possibilities for the future and actions or strategies for realizing these possibilities; the belief in and pursuit of constructive actions that solve or address problems and challenges; optimism about the future—the belief that life can improve; the opposite of pessimism and nihilism; and the capacity to pursue goals in the face of uncertainty (about the future), potential fallibility, and fear. Having inspiring and informed (realistic) self and grand narratives, such as evolutionary optimism.
9. Love: The capacity to see and feel the value of things—to have highly positive emotional experiences in the face of existence; appreciation and gratitude; to experience compassion and concern for others; the desire and skill to cultivate positive interactions and experiences with others; and to see, facilitate, and/or create beauty in the world.
10. Deep Purpose and Tenacity: Purpose in life as opposed to apathy and lack of motivation. Grounded in the capacity and act of commitment; requiring willpower and self-control; cultivated through sustained discipline and persistence in the face of adversity; and motivated and anchored to long term goals (extended motivational future consciousness). The overarching intentionality and directionality in one’s life and ideal future self-narrative—the higher good or reality creating transcendence in one’s personal life.

11. Ethical Pragmatism: The desire and capacity for, and demonstrated realization of, facilitating the good life for oneself and others in the context of the world; high practical knowledge or practical wisdom; engagement and constructive action in the world; the capacity to synthesize knowledge, ethics, and action; and concern with the problems and challenges of life and disposition to constructively address them.
12. Creativity: The future is the act of creation and everyone is participating within it. Creativity is a skill, but also a virtue that requires the cultivation of courage and optimism, the pursuit of learning and knowledge, a spirit of adventure and growth, a resistance to conformity (for the sake of conformity), an independence of mind, and well-developed thinking skills and modes of understanding. Creativity balances disciplined work and study with play and spontaneity. Wise people show practical creativity. Love is a creation; happiness is a creation; beauty is a creation; the good life is a creation.
13. Balance and Temperance: Key dimensions of balance and temperance include the intellect/mind and emotion/heart; logic and intuition; concern for oneself and concern for others; humility/flexibility/openness and conviction/determination; gratitude/contentment and desire/motivational drive; risk/change and security/stability; order and chaos; discipline/action and play/relaxation; and the weighing of different, and at times, conflicting values, pertinent to wise and balanced decision making. Wisdom integrates and balances the above key character virtues and values.

As two concluding points:

It seems to me that although the above list provides an abstract and analytical description of the virtue of wisdom, the reality of wisdom is that it is always manifested within a unique individual. (There are probably also wise organizations and groups as well.) Wise persons have their own special and distinctive personalities. They share personal traits (as listed in the virtues above) but each brings their own irreducible color and memorable quality to their expressions of wisdom. This personal and distinctive quality to wisdom is undoubtedly connected to the creative dimension of the virtue of wisdom.

The question, of course, could be asked: If these are the virtues and capacities of wisdom, how can they be developed? First, I should note that because these virtues are an interdependent set of personal qualities, working on individual qualities will frequently have positive and growth promoting effects on other qualities. The virtues of wisdom, to a great degree, hang together—are mutually self-reinforcing. Second, it seems to me that the first two qualities on the list—self-responsibility and realistic idealism—are essential first steps toward the development of any of the other virtues. Accepting responsibility for improving oneself and believing in the concept of standards of excellence are foundational for the development of wisdom. Third, following from recent research by Roy Baumeister (2011) on the capacity for willpower and self-control, as well as the age-old wisdom of Aristotle, one develops any skill or capacity through disciplined practice. It may seem overly simplistic, but to develop wisdom one needs to

self-consciously work on acting wise. Capacity follows from repeated action. As Gretchen Rubin (2009) states, "Do good, be good." Fourth, results emerge (when they do) from desire; one grows in wisdom from wanting to be wise. Wanting to be wise may not be a sufficient condition for realizing wisdom, but it is necessary. Philosophy is the love of wisdom; one realizes wisdom by loving the pursuit of it. To be wise, one needs to be a philosopher. And finally, along with self-responsibility, effort, and love, there needs to be hope and optimism (another one of the virtues); one needs to believe that one can realize or achieve wisdom. Hope, along with love, empowers action.

The answer to how to develop wisdom lies within the virtues of wisdom itself.

Baumeister, Roy and Tierney, John *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2011.

Lombardo, Thomas "The Wisdom of Future Consciousness" in *Innovation and Creativity in a Complex World* (Ed. Cynthia Wagner). Bethesda, Maryland: World Future Society, 2009.

Lombardo, Thomas "Wisdom Facing Forward: What It Means to Have Heightened Future Consciousness" *The Futurist*, Vol. 44, No. 5, September-October, 2010.

Lombardo, Thomas "Wisdom in the 21st Century: A Theory of Psycho-Social Development" *World Affairs Journal*, April, 2011.

Rubin, Gretchen *The Happiness Project*. New York: Harper, 2009.

Sternberg, Robert (Ed.) *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Sternberg, Robert "A Balance Theory of Wisdom" *Review of General Psychology*, Vol.2, No.4, 1998.

Sternberg, Robert and Jordan, Jennifer (Ed.) *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.