

A proposal for the best account of Wisdom

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Abstract

The concept of wisdom has been around since the early middle-ages of human history. So elusive was this concept in the beginning that it was contemplated by the likes of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates was the first to consider wisdom as a new way of thinking that is essential to a well-lived life. Confucius spoke of wisdom as a virtue that was the result of actively reflecting on what was learnt rather than passively learning facts (Kim, 2014). Similarly, Aristotle thought of wisdom to be the most fundamental human virtue. Despite varying lines of thought that emanated from the concept of wisdom, the recognition of this virtue as one that is needed for a well-lived life remained constant. The most brilliant human minds in history recognized the importance in understanding this concept therefore it is prudent we also attempt to follow in their footsteps on the path to wisdom. This paper aims to provide a modern, well-rounded account of wisdom, building on the foundations set by the likes of Socrates. The following paper provides a range of accounts with my interpretation of which I believe is the best account.

Introduction

Many confuse knowledge with wisdom, but this misconception can be seen blatantly in the modern world. There are many instances where remarkably intelligent people have acted foolishly. Wisdom, therefore, cannot be a function of knowledge, or at least it is just one component of wisdom. However, Socrates introduced the idea of knowledge into his account of wisdom. It is only when we know what is good then we can act to obtain that good (University of Chicago, in press). The state of mind where the mind possesses this knowledge of knowing what is good and acting to obtain this good is what Socrates refers to as Sophia or wisdom. He makes a mistake by thinking wisdom is the same as attainable knowledge therefore humans can never fully be wise due to our cognitive limitations. Plato, on the other hand, drawing insight from Socrates made the distinction that wisdom is distinct from having perfect knowledge. However, he also claims that not everyone can attain wisdom, one needs to be trained. Many religions also have their pathways to attaining wisdom and therefore freedom from suffering. This seems appealing to many individuals as who does not want a life free from suffering? In Buddhism, attaining wisdom is one path to enlightenment which involves seeing through the illusions of the world and overcoming self-deceit. It not only involves attaining knowledge, but also through experience. There is much parallels drawn from this account to modern accounts from wisdom as will be revealed later on in this paper. Much progress since then have been made on this topic since ancient times as living a fulfilling life is a worthwhile pursuit and as such it should be well understood how to accomplish this. The need to understand wisdom is more so evident in current politics where global leaders tend to lack wisdom (Sternberg, 2018). Such leaders are toxic and often encourage stratification amongst their followers and only seek their own interests. Wise people bring out the best in people by seeking the common good (Sternberg, 2018). There are many examples of this type of toxic leadership in recent history- example Haiti and Venezuela. In Haiti, their leader robbed the country blind of their riches and left the country in shambles. It is shocking that such leadership is allowed in the 21st century and such unwise, or foolish, leaders are even elected in the first place. To understand this, one needs to understand wisdom first. There are many modern accounts of wisdom, usually building from each other. This paper seeks to outline some of the modern approaches to wisdom and ends with what I propose to be the best approach to understanding this concept.

Imbalance Theory

The first theory of wisdom that will be addressed in this paper is the imbalance theory of wisdom proposed by Sternberg in 2017. This builds upon his previous balance theory which he proposed in 1998. To understand the imbalance theory, first we must understand the balance theory. The balance theory seeks to explain what it means to be wise. The balance theory views wisdom as inherent in the interaction between an individual and a situational context (Sternberg, 1998). In other words, wisdom is the ability to balance conflicting interests, through the application of tacit knowledge, in the pursuit of a common good. Tacit knowledge is defined as procedural knowledge that guides behaviour but may not be readily available for introspection (Sternberg, 1999). To do this, one must balance their interpersonal, intrapersonal and extrapersonal interests. Foolishness is also defined as the opposite of wisdom, so in this case, foolishness is the result of an imbalance of these interests. Therefore, wisdom is procedural knowledge; it is making a decision, the result of which is beneficial to all in difficult and complex circumstances (Sternberg, 1998). The balance theory suggests that wisdom is at least partially domain specific, in that tacit knowledge is acquired within a given context or set of contexts (Sternberg, 1998). Within this domain, individuals must possess creativity, intelligence and have moral or ethical reasoning that promote the common good. It is domain specific in that actions that may be wise in one domain may not necessarily be wise in another. Culture for instance is one example of this: one may be navigate western culture with ease, but using the same procedural knowledge in eastern cultures may not be wise as their traditions etc., are different (different domain). Lastly, under this theory, Sternberg makes it clear that wisdom is acquired with little help from others, through experience and not through formal instruction. This makes the distinction between wisdom and knowledge, as knowledge can be imparted from one person to another.

Complementing this, is Sternberg's imbalance theory of wisdom. Similar to the balance theory, wisdom is defined as the application of tacit knowledge as guided by values toward the achievement of a common good, through a balance among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests (Sternberg, 2017). In contrast to the balance theory, foolishness is heavily addressed within this theory. He defines foolishness as the opposite of wisdom (Sternberg, 2017). Centrally, foolishness is an imbalance of tacit knowledge. However, it is not simply a lack of balance among interests that result in foolishness, it is more complex. Rather, self-deceit is also at play where one believes they can act foolish without consequence. When trying to understand how smart people can be foolish under this theory, Sternberg outlines three dispositions that make these people, particularly those in power, act foolishly. Firstly, a sense of omniscience results from having any knowable knowledge at their disposal. People of power can simply make a call and have at hand any knowledge they seek. This makes such people prone to believing they know more than they do. Secondly, a sense of omnipotence results from the power one holds and is blatant in people in high positions of power. This is simply the belief that they can do whatever they please. Lastly, a sense of invulnerability results from the feeling of being untouchable by having people to protect them if needed. Particularly with presidents, prime ministers etc., they have the full force of the army or police service at their disposal.

The key to understanding wisdom under this theory is that wisdom involves seeking good for oneself and others. If you make a decision that is at the detriment of yourself, others or both, then that is a foolish decision. Foolishness always involves one or more of your interests (interpersonal, etc.) being out of balance. To overcome foolishness, and attain wisdom and flourishing, it requires introspection through a series of processes Sternberg labels “the meta components of thought.” The series of processes are: (1) recognizing the problem, (2) defining the nature of the problem, (3) representing information about the problem, (4) formulating a strategy for solving the problem, (5) allocating resources to the solution of a problem, (6) monitoring one’s solution of the problem, and (7) evaluating feedback regarding that solution (Sternberg, 2017). These steps require much introspection and also requires the ability to look past one’s own biases. By introspecting on one’s behaviour, you are afforded the ability to make wiser decisions and therefore live a more fulfilling life. You need to recognize conflicts of interests and make decisions for the greater good of everyone, by balancing your interests and limiting the dispositions that make people foolish (by being mindful of your sense of omniscience etc.).

Wisdom through Wit and Virtue

From Sternberg’s theory, he mainly focuses on wisdom being the pursuit of a common good. However, he fails to mention what intrinsic or psychological quality affords people to seek a common good. Why is it that people seek the benefit of others if the option to maximize their gain is available? We know humans are autopoietic agents that seek to maintain and promote itself so why would we limit our gains for the benefit of others? The answer to this lies in morality and virtue. Aristotle argued that wisdom and virtue are interdependent so one cannot be wise without also being virtuous. Sternberg, albeit subtly, hinted to this hidden factor of wisdom in his earlier years then explicitly stated the centrality of morality and ethics in his later papers. A person who uses his mental powers to become an evil genius may be academically or practically intelligent, but the person cannot be wise (Sternberg, 1998). This bridge of understanding was finally built through the work of Zhang et. al., 2022. They propose an account of wisdom that integrates virtue and wit which can then be divided into natural and humane wisdom. In addition to this, this theory states that wisdom can be domain specific, domain general and omniscient as opposed to just domain specific in the balance theory.

Firstly, some definitions are in order. This theory integrates wit and virtue as it relates to wisdom. Wit refers to one’s overall ability to deploy fluid intelligence to properly integrate crystallized intelligence to efficiently and effectively find and solve problems (Zhang et. al., 2022). Wit is a combination of intelligence, practical knowledge (including tacit knowledge) and effective, strategic ways of thinking. These aspects of wit may be unevenly distributed in persons where one or more of these components of wisdom may be lacking or overly dominant. On the other hand, virtue as it relates to wisdom requires virtuous motivation, means and results (Zhang et. al., 2022). Similar to Sternberg, this follows from the aspect of wisdom that speaks of the ‘common

good'. Virtues in wisdom include one or more of the following aspects: temperance, responsibility, honesty, benevolence, and justice. Witty actions without any of these aspects cannot be wise. The necessity to integrate these two components is apparent since these are two central components of other theories of wisdom. Wit comprises of the intelligence based component of wisdom whereas virtue comprises of the intrinsic or value-based component of wisdom. This bridges Sternberg's theory along with more modern interpretations of wisdom and more ancient theories of wisdom such as that of Buddhism. Aristotle had this sense of virtue in his theory of wisdom as well. He states one cannot be practically wise without being good. This good he refers to points to the virtues discussed earlier. The only way for one to integrate wit and virtue is through wisdom, otherwise you fail. Witty people often use unethical means to solve problems or may do so without necessarily considering the interests of others. In contrast, overly virtuous people may tend to the needs of others to their own detriment. To strike the balance between these two, wisdom is needed. Individuals who wish to become wise should develop the ability to habitually consider and solve problems from the perspective of both virtue and wit in such a way to promote a common good (Zhang et. al., 2022).

To further understand wisdom under this paradigm, wisdom was classified under two categories: humane and natural wisdom. Classifications of wisdom is not new; Aristotle proposed practical and philosophical wisdom, Kahn (2005) proposed conventional and emergent wisdom and Sternberg proposed the domain specificity of wisdom. It is the hope of these new classifications to bring a more generalized theory of wisdom, one that takes culture, socioeconomic status, education level etc., into account. There are many definitions of natural and humane wisdom. Under Buddhism, natural wisdom refers to the natural motivation to alleviate pain and suffering of ourselves and others (Wegela, 2010). However, in this theory, we take natural wisdom to be the ingenuity in solving problems related to the natural sciences. In contrast, humane wisdom refers to ingenuity in solving problems of the social sciences and humanities. In other words, natural wisdom deals with the objective truth while humane wisdom is more multi-faceted and depends on culture, individual differences etc. The need for integrating these two under this theory of wisdom is that it allows for an umbrella understanding of wisdom. Natural wisdom is associated with competence, intelligence etc., while humane wisdom measures virtue, morality etc., so the integration of the two one would be integrating wit and virtue for a common good which is the thesis of this theory of wisdom. This theory also explains why intelligent people act foolishly. One can possess natural wisdom but lack humane wisdom and vice-versa. It should be noted that despite taking culture etc., into account, this theory is still somewhat domain specific. Only God is noted as having supreme or general wisdom. Humans can never be wise in all situations. In fact, any person who claims they have attained such is foolish and lacks humility (Grossman, 2017). This theory also explains the toxicity of leaders in the current world; this is where individuals lack humane wisdom despite having high levels of natural wisdom or in other words, they lack wise virtues. So, how does one attain wisdom under this theory or escape being foolish? This theory assumes wisdom is not static, one's virtues is subject to change over time due to environmental factors etc. There is no clear answer as to whether wisdom increases, decreases or remains stable over time, rather it is dependent on the individual and their environment. One can be wise in one environment but be foolish in another despite having the same natural wisdom in both situations. To flourish, one needs at least average wit through

education but also some sort of moral development to foster and stabilize virtue. moral development usually starts from childhood and may be difficult to change as one gets older. To maximize wisdom in children, morality must be taught at young ages. In young children, parents who practice mindful parenting tend to raise children who are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour (Gouveia et al., 2016). It is unclear if morality matures with age. Although older individuals perceive growth in their moral identity through social roles etc., which may lead them to act morally but does not necessarily mean they have matured in their moral development (Murua, 2015).

While both theories take a good aim at understanding wisdom, I feel there is still much to be done in this field. Despite this, I argue the imbalance theory lacks certain qualities that make it insufficient for explaining wisdom. The imbalance theory does not have any means of empirically validating any of its claims. In contrast, the latter theory allows for the measurement of wit and virtue to measure wisdom. Wit can be measured through the Integrative Wisdom Scale that measures four components of wit. In addition, virtue can be measured using the IWS which can measure positive qualities such as awe, honesty etc. While objective measures seem to be desirable, self-reports have often been found to be valid (Jeste et. al., 2019). Sternberg's theory also does not tell us what the 'common good' refers to as it does not take culture into account. What may be good for one may not be necessarily good for another. This problem also extends into the latter theory, both of which failed to give an explanation of this issue. Sternberg's theory also does not address the importance of culture in wisdom. In contrast, the classification of natural and humane wisdom is the first step in understanding the influence of culture in wisdom. Western cultures are more individualistic whereas eastern cultures are more collectivist (Fan et. al., 2021). Individualistic cultures tend to emphasize natural wisdom whereas eastern cultures emphasize humane wisdom. By using these categories, one can attempt to integrate these two in a meaningful way to attain wisdom. Still, like Sternberg's theory, much introspection is required as one needs to know where the influence culture has on them and what steps needs to be taken to build on the type of wisdom they are lacking in. I find this theory more appealing to the western world as it may be easier to gain natural wisdom as opposed to humane wisdom. Perhaps the beginning of wisdom lies in childhood with the promotion of prosocial behaviour, empathy etc., through mindful and authoritative parenting techniques. Then with the integration of the school system to promote natural wisdom, one can then strike to balance the two in their problem solving or other areas of life to make wise decisions and live a more fulfilling life.

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