

KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

Most people would agree that, although our age far surpasses all previous ages in knowledge, there has been no correlative increase in wisdom. But agreement ceases as soon as we attempt to define 'wisdom' to the extent and consider means of promoting it. I want to ask first what wisdom is, and then what can be done to teach it.

There are several factors that contribute to wisdom. Of these I should put first a sense of proportion: the capacity to take account of all the important factors in a problem and to attach to each its due weight. This has become more difficult than it used to be owing to, complexity of the specialized knowledge required for various kinds of technicians. Suppose, for example, that you are engaged in research in scientific medicine. The work is difficult and is likely to absorb the whole of your intellectual energy. You have no time to consider the effect which your discoveries or inventions may have outside the field of medicine. You succeed (let us say), as modern medicine has succeeded, in enormously lowering the infant death-rate, not only in Europe and America but also in Asia and Africa. This has the entirely unintended result of making the food supply inadequate and lowering the standard of life in the most populous parts of the world. To take an even more spectacular example, which is in everybody's mind at the present time: you study the composition of the atom from a disinterested desire for knowledge, and incidentally place in the hands of powerful lunatics the means of destroying the human race. In such ways the pursuit of knowledge may become harmful unless it is combined with wisdom; and wisdom in the sense of comprehensive vision is not necessarily present in specialists in the pursuit of knowledge.

The essence of wisdom is emancipation, as far as possible, from the tyranny of the here and the now. We cannot help the egoism of our senses. Sight, sound and touch are bound up with our own bodies and cannot be made impersonal. Our emotions start similarly from ourselves. An infant feels hunger or discomfort, and is unaffected except by his own physical condition. Gradually, with the years, his horizon widens, and, in proportion as his thoughts and feelings become less personal and less concerned with his own physical states, he achieves growing wisdom. This is, of course, a matter of degree. No one can view the world with complete impartiality; and, if anyone could, he would hardly be able to remain alive. But it is possible to make a continual approach towards impartiality: on the one hand, by knowing things somewhat remote in time or space; and on the other hand by giving such things their due weight in our feelings. It is this approach towards impartiality that constitutes growth in wisdom.

Can wisdom in this sense be taught? And, If it can, should the teaching of it be one of the aims of education? I should answer both these questions in the affirmative.

I have said that in some degree wisdom can be taught. I think that this teaching should have a larger intellectual element than has been customary in what has been thought of as moral instruction. The disastrous results of hatred and narrow-mindedness to those who feel them can be pointed out incidentally in the course of giving knowledge. I do not think that knowledge and morals ought to be too much separated. It is true that the kind of specialized knowledge which is required for various kinds of skill has little to do with wisdom. But it should be supplemented in education by wider surveys calculated to put it in its place in the total of human activities. Even the best technicians should also be good citizens; and when I say 'citizens', I mean citizens of the world and not of this or that sector nation. With every increase of knowledge and skill, wisdom becomes more necessary, for every such increase augments our capacity for realizing our purposes and therefore augments our capacity for evil, if our purposes are unwise. The world needs

wisdom as it has never needed it before; and if knowledge continues to increase, the world will need wisdom in the future even more than it does now.

Glossary

surpass	: do or be better than; exceed
due weight	: suitable/proper importance
spectacular	: impressive/extraordinary
lunatic	: wildly foolish person
pursuit	: action of pursuing (continue to be busy with)
emancipation	: action of setting somebody free from something
customary	: usual; according to custom
augment	: increase

EXERCISES

Comprehension questions

1. What are the two questions that the writer wants to ask?
2. What is the first factor that contributes to wisdom?
3. What work is difficult?
4. In which continents has the infant death-rate been lowered?
5. How may pursuit of knowledge be protected from being harmful?
6. What is the essence of wisdom?
7. What cannot be made impersonal?
8. How do feelings become less personal?
9. What are the two possible approaches towards impartiality?
10. What are the two questions the writer should answer in affirmative?
11. Can wisdom be taught?
12. What should not be separated?
13. What is required for various kinds of skill?
14. What does the writer mean by 'citizens'?
15. When does wisdom become more necessary?

Short questions

1. What kind of relationship is there between knowledge and wisdom?
2. Summarize the argument of this passage.
3. Show advantages of wisdom over knowledge.
4. How would you relate wisdom to impartiality?
5. Why should wisdom be made an integral part of education according to the writer?
6. Briefly describe the importance of wisdom for today's educated youths.
7. 'Mere knowledge without wisdom makes education futile.' Justify this.
8. Why is it necessary to develop more wisdom while acquiring knowledge?
9. Who is a better person according to the writer-a knowledgeable man or a wise man?
10. Explain the main ideas contained in 'Knowledge and Wisdom'.
11. What do you mean by 'a sense of proportion'?

12. Show advantages of wisdom over knowledge.

Composition/Long questions

1. Write an essay on 'Wise Man versus Knowledgeable Man'.