

Misconceptions Concerning Wisdom

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Abstract

If our concern is to help wisdom to flourish in the world, then the central task before us is to transform academia so that it takes up its proper task of seeking and promoting wisdom instead of just acquiring knowledge. Improving knowledge about wisdom is no substitute; nor is the endeavour of searching for the correct definition of wisdom

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1. Do We Need More Knowledge about Wisdom?

Many hold that the world is heading towards disaster. And when one considers the grave global problems that we face, and our appalling incapacity to respond to them, it is difficult not to conclude that this is indeed the case. The explosive growth of the world's population, the development and spread of modern armaments and the lethal character of modern warfare, the destruction of natural habitats and rapid extinction of species, immense inequalities of wealth and power around the globe, depletion of finite natural resources, pollution of earth, sea and air, and above all global warming and all the disasters for humanity that that threatens to unleash: none of this promises well for the future. We know we are threatened by these grave global problems, but we seem to lack the capacity, the wisdom, to resolve them.

As Robert Sternberg has remarked recently "If there is anything the world needs, it is wisdom. Without it, I exaggerate not at all in saying that very soon, there may be no world."¹ This consideration may have led Sternberg and others, in recent years, to initiate and develop the scientific study of wisdom. If the world is to acquire vitally needed wisdom – so it is implicitly assumed – we first need to know what wisdom is, and how it is to be acquired. We need more *knowledge* about wisdom.

I first became aware of this new field of the scientific study of wisdom as a result of the publication of Sternberg's book *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*² in 1990, to which nineteen researchers contributed, including Sternberg himself. Since then, there has been an upsurge in scientific research into wisdom.³ Allied to this, no doubt, is the University of Chicago's Arete Initiative, a \$2 million research program on "the nature and benefits of wisdom" which seeks in part to arrive at a definition of wisdom.⁴

Does this upsurge in scientific research into wisdom constitute an adequate response to the global crises we face? The rationale behind the research is clear. If we are to manage our planetary affairs in wiser ways than we have done in the recent past, we urgently need more wisdom in the world. In order to discover how we might achieve this, what we need, it would seem, is more knowledge and understanding about the nature of wisdom, what it is, what its origins are, how it is to be acquired and developed. Hence the growth in research that seeks to define wisdom and improve our scientific knowledge and understanding of it.

All this seems reasonable enough, and yet in my view it represents a seriously inadequate response to the crises we face. Something far more radical is required than an increase in knowledge about wisdom. What we need is a radical transformation in the aims and methods, the whole character, of science, and of academic inquiry more generally, so that the basic aim of academia becomes to seek and promote wisdom. We urgently need a new kind of academic inquiry that puts problems of living at the heart of the enterprise, problems of knowledge emerging out of, and feeding back into the central, fundamental intellectual activity of proposing imaginatively, and assessing critically, possible actions, policies, political programmes, philosophies of life designed to help solve our global problems. This new kind of inquiry would devote reason to the task of helping us make progress towards as good a world as possible. In short, instead of seeking more *knowledge* about wisdom, all of rational inquiry needs to become devoted to acquiring and promoting wisdom – wisdom being understood to be the capacity and active desire to realize – to apprehend and create – what is of value in life, for oneself others. Wisdom in this sense includes knowledge, technological know-how and understanding, but much else besides.⁵

As I have argued at some length elsewhere,⁶ all our current global problems are the result of successfully pursuing scientific knowledge and technological know-how in a way which is dissociated from a more fundamental quest to discover how to tackle our problems of living intelligently, effectively and humanely. The successful pursuit of scientific knowledge and technological know-how makes modern industry, agriculture, medicine and hygiene possible, which in turn lead to great benefits for humanity, but lead also to all our global problems: population growth, modern armaments, destruction of natural habitats, global warming and the rest. What we need to do is embed scientific and technological research in the more fundamental quest to discover how to resolve our global problems in increasingly cooperatively rational ways – especially those *created* or made possible by modern science.

The enterprise of acquiring more *knowledge* about wisdom within the *status quo* is, in short, no substitute for the revolution in our institutions of learning and research that we urgently require so that the basic task becomes to help us create a wiser world.

Those who seek knowledge about wisdom in an academic context need to take note. The greatest obstacle to the growth of wisdom - *personal* wisdom, *institutional* wisdom, *social* wisdom, even *global* wisdom – is, quite simply, the long-standing, gross, structural irrationality of academia, devoted as it is to the pursuit of knowledge. Develop a more rigorous kind of academic inquiry devoted to the pursuit of wisdom, as defined above, and wisdom would flourish in our world.

Wisdom-inquiry – as I call inquiry rationally devoted to the pursuit of wisdom – requires that values, feelings and desires are expressed and critically scrutinized within the intellectual domain of inquiry, since realizing what is of value rationally requires that this is done. For wisdom we need, as I said in my first book, to put “the mind in touch with the heart, and the heart in touch with the mind, so that we may develop heartfelt minds and mindful hearts”.⁷ But knowledge-inquiry (by and large what we have at present) demands that values, feelings and desires be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry so that objective factual knowledge may be acquired. As a result, knowledge-inquiry splits off the mind from the heart, thought from feeling, with the result that thought comes to be driven by unacknowledged, unexamined values, feelings

and desires, rarely of the best, and wisdom founders. Knowledge-inquiry also fails to promote wisdom in failing to give priority to (i) the task of proposing and critically examining possible solutions to problems of living – possible actions, policies, political programmes, philosophies of life – and (ii) the task of articulating and critically examining problematic aims – personal, institutional, social, global. Both are central and fundamental within wisdom-inquiry.⁸

2. Does Defining Wisdom Correctly Pose a Problem?

Those who seek to improve knowledge about wisdom tend to hold that an important first step is to define wisdom correctly. As Richard Trowbridge has remarked “Defining wisdom remains a major concern for scholars in all fields with an interest in the concept.”⁹ The Arete Initiative, already mentioned, actually has as its title “Defining Wisdom”.¹⁰ The first question to answer correctly, it seems, is “What is wisdom?”.

All this assumes, however, that wisdom has some kind of essential nature that is capable of being captured in the correct definition of “wisdom”. But this Aristotelian idea has been devastatingly criticized and demolished by Karl Popper.¹¹ In seeking the correct answer to “What is wisdom?”, the correct definition of wisdom, we are chasing a will-o-the-wisp. What “wisdom” means may, quite legitimately, depend on context and purpose. It is up to us to decide what, precisely, we choose to mean by “wisdom”, depending on what our purpose is. And indeed, those who take the task of defining wisdom seriously have come up with a great variety of definitions.¹² What needs to be appreciated is that there can be no such thing as *the correct* definition of wisdom: the search for it is the search for something that does not exist.

What implications does this have for the endeavour of improving knowledge – even *scientific* knowledge – about wisdom? Just this. Do not engage in the hollow task of trying to arrive at the *correct* definition of wisdom. Avoid defining wisdom in a detailed, precise, narrow way because, if this definition is taken seriously in subsequent work, it will mean results will be restricted to this narrow definition. Those who do research in the field of acquiring knowledge about wisdom would perhaps do well to agree on a broad, loose, inclusive definition, if a definition has to be formulated at all. But the chief point to take into account is, of course, the one emphasized above. Granted our concern is to help wisdom to flourish in the world, then the really important task before us is not to improve *knowledge* about wisdom but rather to re-organize the academic enterprise so that it becomes devoted, as a whole, to seeking and promoting wisdom.

At this point it may be objected that I criticize the whole idea of defining “wisdom”, and yet put forward just such a definition myself. Should I not practice what I preach?

Let me explain. The argument I have spent the last forty years developing and trying to get into the public arena (about the urgent need to bring about a revolution in the aims and methods of academia) I first developed entirely independently of the notion of wisdom.¹³ Subsequently, having come to appreciate that the basic intellectual and humanitarian aim of the academic enterprise ought to be not just knowledge but rather to help people realize what is of value to them in life, I cast around for a word to stand in for this aim. It struck me that “wisdom” might not be too inappropriate (although I was aware that the word has connotations at odds with the use I intended to make of it). So, for me, “wisdom” is merely a technical term. It is just shorthand for “the capacity and the active desire to realize – apprehend and make real – what is of value in life, for

oneself and others”. What really matters, in my view, is that academia should be rationally organized and devoted to pursuing that aim. That it is called “wisdom” is no more than an afterthought, a secondary matter of no real significance.

Thus I am not engaged in “defining wisdom” in any serious way, at all. I am merely using the word as shorthand for something that I do hold to be of great importance, just indicated.

Having removed myself from the enterprise of ‘defining wisdom’, I would, however, like to make the following remark in favour of my definition. There is a sense in which it successfully encompasses all other serious definitions. There would seem to be one point that all those concerned with wisdom, in one way or another, agree on: wisdom is something that it is of great value to possess. If this is so then, granted one possesses wisdom in my sense, it is reasonable to conclude one will come to possess wisdom in these other senses as well. A person who has ‘the capacity and active desire to realize what is of value’ will, presumably, acquire personal characteristics of value associated with other definitions of wisdom, whatever these characteristics may be – self-knowledge, compassion, empathy, the ability to make good judgments about what really matters, and so on. Of course, if one of those other notions of ‘wisdom’ is such that it is not of value to have ‘wisdom’ in that sense, then being wise in my sense will probably not lead to ‘wisdom’ in the other sense. But then, if ‘wisdom’ in that other sense is not something that it is of value to possess, can this be an acceptable definition? The great virtue of my definition of wisdom is that, because it ties wisdom to the capacity to realize what is of value but leaves what is of value entirely open, there is a sense in which this definition encompasses all other definitions which are such that being wise in any of these other senses is of value, or is the means to the realization of what is of value.

Notes

¹ Sternberg, R. J., 2003, *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. xviii.

² Sternberg, R. J., ed., 1990, *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins and Development*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

³ See, for example: Smith, J., and P.B. Baltes, 1990, A study of wisdom-related knowledge: Age/cohort differences in response to life-planning problems, *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 494-505; Baltes, P.B. and U.M. Staudinger, 1993, The Search for a Psychology of Wisdom, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 75-80; Sternberg, R. J., 1998, A balance theory of wisdom, *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 2, pp. 347-365; Baltes, P.B. and U.M. Staudinger, 2000, Wisdom: A metaheuristic (pragmatic) to orchestrate mind and virtue toward excellence, *American Psychologist*, vol. 55, pp. 122-136; Kunzmann, U. and P.B. Baltes, 2003, Wisdom-related knowledge: Affective, motivational, and interpersonal correlates, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 9, pp. 1104-1119; Le, T. N., 2008, Cultural values, life experiences, and wisdom, *International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 259-281; Trowbridge, R. H., 2008, Wisdom and lifelong learning in the twenty-first century, in Barnett, R. and N. Maxwell, eds., 2008, *Wisdom in the University*, Routledge, London, pp. 63-76; Yang, S.-Y., 2008, Real-life contextual manifestations of wisdom, *International Journal of Aging and Human*

Development, vol. 67, no. 4, pp. 273-303; Yang, S.- Y., 2008, A process view of wisdom, *Journal of Adult Development*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 62-75. See also works referred to by these papers. I am grateful to Richard Trowbridge for drawing my attention to many of these papers.

⁴ See <http://wisdomresearch.org/>. This website has a long list of publications on wisdom that have appeared since the publication of Sternberg's *Wisdom* in 1990.

⁵ Maxwell, N., 1984, *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 66.

⁶ See my website www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk. The argument is summarized by my 2007, *From Knowledge to Wisdom: The Need for an Academic Revolution*, *London Review of Education*, 5, pp. 97-115, reprinted in R. Barnett and N. Maxwell, eds., 2008, *Wisdom in the University*, Routledge, pp. 1-19, and available at www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk/Essays.htm. For the full, detailed argument see my 1984, *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution for Science and the Humanities*, Blackwell, Oxford; 2nd revised and extended edition, 2007, Pentire Press, London.

⁷ Maxwell, N., 1976, *What's Wrong With Science? Towards a People's Rational Science of Delight and Compassion*, Bran's Head Books, Frome, UK, p. 5; 2nd ed., Pentire Press, London, 2009, p. 5.

⁸ For references, see note 6.

⁹ See his 2005, *The Scientific Approach to Wisdom*, p. 3, available at www.wisdompage.com/TheScientificApproachtoWisdom.doc (accessed February 2011).

¹⁰ See <http://wisdomresearch.org/> (accessed February 2011).

¹¹ Popper, K. R., 1962, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London vol. 2, ch. 11, section 2, pp. 9 - 21.

¹² See Richard Trowbridge, "Definitions of Wisdom", <http://wisdomcenteredlife.org/definitions.aspx> (accessed February 2011).

¹³ The first exposition is to be found in my 1976, *What's Wrong With Science*, Bran's Head Books, Frome, UK. In that book I wrote of a "people's rational science of delight and compassion" – a part of the subtitle of the book – and did not employ the word "wisdom" in the argument at all.