

Modern Wisdom

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Philosophy is generally concerned with the nature of things: truths about reality, human nature, and why things are and do what they are and do. In this sense, philosophy fits its archaic name, “natural science.” Philosophy can also be described as the “pursuit or love of wisdom” (this is the origin of the word) and it is imagined that the philosophical life, a life characterized by contemplation and inquiry, is necessary to attain true wisdom.

Modern philosophy, with its emphasis on breaking down old beliefs even more than constructing new ones, is decidedly on the “science” side of philosophy. Nonetheless, I believe that all philosophers study the subject in part in hopes of understanding and gaining wisdom. Every “advance” in philosophy as the natural science is associated with a refinement or change in the view of wisdom. For example, George Berkeley proclaims that philosophy is “nothing else but the study of wisdom and truth” in the introduction to his *Principles*, and then speaks hardly another word of the nature of wisdom. What is the wisdom of modern philosophy? More to the point, what is wisdom, according to various branches of modern philosophy, and to modern philosophy as a whole?

1 Definition of Wisdom

To answer this question, even without trying to define wisdom before it's definition is sought, we need to specify what we are looking for– that is, the indications of wisdom.

Wisdom is:

Knowledge – Wisdom, firstly, is a characteristic of the mind or the soul, not of the body. It is a kind of knowledge, skill, sense, or intuition that affects what one thinks.

Wise Action – In addition, wisdom is inseparable from the decisions that are made in the real world (whatever the form of the real world is, according to the perception of the wise one). It is not just a matter of what is in one's mind, but how one uses it.

Judgment – Wisdom is concerned with using things in the mind to make right judgments and decisions. Related to this is the ability to perceive the philosophical significance of things, which can naturally imply the judgment that is to be made.

Virtue – Wisdom is known as the opposite of foolishness and means not just any thoughtful action, but specifically those with moral character.

This essay will consider each of these aspects in the context of four modern philosophers: René Descartes, George Berkeley, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. However, first we will examine what aspects of wisdom seem most important to each of these different branches of modern philosophy.

2 Branches of Modern Philosophy

2.1 Descartes's Wisdom

For Descartes, father of modern philosophy, wisdom lies in two actions: doubting and thinking upon God, and these characteristics can be seen reflected in all of the later modern philosophers.

Doubting has two major implications. The first is that one must separate oneself from the world. In the meditations, Descartes notes “how little truth there is in our perceptions of corporeal objects.” Wisdom, then, has a well-regulated connection to the world, where wisdom must come not from perceptions, but only what from what one knows.

The second is a drive toward knowing things self-evidently, that comes from a doubt of the processes of the mind. The only way to know the “certainty of truths which... are not immediate deductions from the first self-evident principles” is to pass over them again and again until no more doubt is possible (Rules). Wisdom, as knowledge, must be hard fought for.

In the Meditations, Descartes says that, “so long as I think only of God, and turn my attention wholly to him, I can discern no cause for error or falsehood.” Confusion lies in the distractions and illusions of the world and the human senses. God is the only undistorted one.

2.2 Berkeley's Wisdom

For Berkeley, the nature of wisdom is less clear. Despite his introductory comment connecting wisdom and philosophy, he neglects the term almost entirely outside of references to “the wisdom of God.”

Berkeley conceives of the universe as the activity in God's mind. Our knowledge of the universe is from perceptions, which “occur” to us the same way as do memories and dreams. These ideas must come from somewhere, and that entity which generates them is Berkeley's God.

God's wisdom Berkeley appears to take as an axiom, and it can mean nothing but exactly that thing which causes God to form the ideas that he forms, rather than others. Wisdom is something that God has, and perhaps can be used through Him.

The context for wisdom is also different for Berkeley. For one, the world formed of the very ideas that bombard us as sensations. Because sensations and thoughts are so closely linked for Berkeley, the potential of a person to be wise or foolish is greatly diminished.

2.3 Hume's Wisdom

The first question that one must ask with respect to David Hume is whether he believed in wisdom at all. Hume speaks out against the philosophers who “give themselves airs of

superior wisdom,” which implies both that he does not believe that these philosophers have that wisdom, and that that wisdom is there to have.

The first statement one can make is negative: wisdom is not to be found in abstract thought. In fact, if wisdom is to come from anywhere, it must come from the perceptions. However, it is nonetheless essential to be able to make appropriate judgments in the physical world, and it is clear that not all judgments (such as those of most philosopher’s, according to Hume) are reasonable.

2.4 Kant’s Wisdom

Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason is laden with his view of wisdom. Practical Reason, for Kant, is exactly the ability of the mind to make judgments that relate to actions in the real world. Kant seems to have three major aspects which characterize the path to wisdom. They are the supremacy of reason, rule-based decisions, and universal rules.

Not only is the faculty of reason the most powerful tool of human life, it is the only mode by which we can make any decision, wise or foolish.

Secondly, we are always in situations where we cannot know all of the information sufficient for making a completely informed decision. However, when the decision-making process is divorced from the facticity of any particular situation, it is possible to come up with universal laws which are wise.

Lastly, these rules, to be wise rules, must apply to everyone. Reason must be objective, not based on any particular person's subjective preferences. Any rule, which is found true by one person, can be found true by any reasonable person. One person's wisdom is the wisdom of all people.

3 Wisdom as Knowledge

One meaning for wisdom is as a synonym for knowledge. A wise person is simply one who knows in depth about an abnormally large region of the terrain of human learning. Few people would agree that any pool of trivia constitutes wisdom, but knowledge that is organized, digested, and ready agrees with many of our ideas of what wisdom should be. William Cowper, in attempting to distinguish between knowledge and wisdom, said that "Knowledge, a rude, unprofitable mass, The mere materials with which wisdom builds, Till smoothed, and squared, and fitted to its place, Does but encumber whom it seems to enrich."

Descartes would readily agree with a modified form of this statement; wisdom is true knowledge. True knowledge is only knowledge that one knows self-evidently. Descartes describes the two techniques which have any hope of providing "knowledge of things without any fear of deception": intuition, by which Descartes means something that is obvious to the faculty of reason; and induction, the logical derivation of additional known truths entirely from known truths. However, making allowances for the fallibility of the human mind, Descartes

advises thinking through steps of an induction until they are as self-evident as those truths arrived at with intuition.

Berkeley has good reason to support this view of wisdom because empirical knowledge is knowledge of God, which is the source of all knowledge and ideas. The facts of the universe are found in the ideas that come from God, and all wisdom comes from him.

In a certain sense, wisdom as knowledge is the only mode of wisdom that Hume acknowledges.

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Abstract thought and the “creation” of arbitrary mental distinctions and unions would seem to Hume as disruptive to the pursuit of wisdom.

Kant is notably uninterested in knowledge. The importance of rules is that they provide methods for the faculty of reason, in the absence of large, historical bodies of information, to generate wise decisions for a given moment.

4 Wisdom as Ability to Use Knowledge

Any serious attempt to define reason must incorporate movement and action in the practical world, which I will refer to as the human world, since it necessarily involves other individuals, but not necessarily physical objects, according to the different philosophies. This is the capacity to use knowledge in ways that do good. Reverend William Paley "In strictness of language there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom; wisdom always supposing action, and action directed by it." Wisdom has also been defined to be "the use of the best means for attaining the best ends."

Actions in the human world is clearly an ulterior motive for Descartes meditations and Meditations. His inspection of the truths that he might derive from fundamental principles is not undirected. They systematically work toward an understanding of the world as the context within which the meditations can have results.

Berkeley is notably unconcerned with how people work in the human world. He is concerned with how each individual comprehends his universe, but not how human beings interact with each other. Each individual interacts with the universe, which is God, and only through Him and by chance with other individuals.

Hume considers there to be no other purpose for knowledge than in its practical use. Hume says,

Accurate and just reasoning is the only catholic remedy, fitted for all persons and all dispositions; and is alone able to subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, renders it in a manner impenetrable to careless reasoners, and gives it the air of science and wisdom.

Although Kant is not interested in knowledge, the entire purpose of his rules and methods is to determine “the use of the best means for attaining the best ends.” Kant’s rules are, in a sense, rules for how one should use one’s limited knowledge to act in the human world.

5 Wisdom as Discernment and Judgment

Wisdom is not only concerned with the actions of a free entity in a ambivalent world. It is tightly related to the ability to perceive the Good, or wisdom, or virtue, or the right path of action, in the human world. In this it is a faculty of judgment or a kind of sense that involves the movement of wills, both of the judging person and those to which the judgment affects.

Descartes was very aware of how easily perceptions could be confused and warp the apparent right and wrongs in the world. Because of this, he became obsessed with weeding out his false perceptions. Wisdom for Descartes is a synonym for having the right perceptions and modes for getting the right perceptions.

Berkeley is also interested in perceptions, but not particular for the sake of judging them. Wisdom, for Berkeley, involved knowing the truth of the perceptions which bombard him, but not particularly in discerning between different types of perceptions or using knowledge of different types for action in the human world.

Hume philosophy is based on perceptions, as the foundations and only source of “truth” in this world, but applying reason to them and qualitative distinctions is to him superfluous and misleading.

Kant is less interested in perceptions. As he said in the introduction to Critique of Pure Reason, “though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience.” Moreover, the interesting aspects of knowledge for Kant are those which derive from reason.

This understanding of wisdom appears to split on rationalist/empiricist lines. Descartes and Kant are uninterested in the physical world, but find wisdom in the abstractions they can find within the world. Berkeley and Hume see abstraction as an obstruction to wisdom rather than an uncovering of it.

6 Wisdom as Virtue

William Cowper said that, "Knowledge and wisdom, far from being one, Have oftentimes no connection. Knowledge dwells In heads replete with thoughts of other men; Wisdom, in minds attentive to their own.... Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much; Wisdom is humble that he knows no more." In distinguishing wisdom from prudence, William Whewell describes wisdom as an improvement over simple prudence: "We conceive, prudence as the virtue by which we select right means for given ends, while wisdom implies the selection of right ends as well as of right means."

With the exception of Kant, the other modern philosophers with which the essay concerns itself are not particularly interested in virtue with respect to wisdom. Kant, however, has very strong opinions of the nature of virtue. Actions in the world, apart from their ethical and virtuous foundations, have no reason. I believe that this is because only Kant was able to manipulate the logical connections sufficiently to make virtue a concrete concept. Without the concept of deontological laws and a strong basis for those laws, virtue is a vague concept, distasteful to modern philosophers.

7 Modern Wisdom

As one can see, there is a lot of variation between the different branches of modern philosophy as to the nature of wisdom. Below, I will try to notes some similarities.

7.1 The Type of Wisdom

One aspect of wisdom that appears to cross philosophical branches, but not temporal divisions, is that of what type of thing wisdom is considered to be.

To start, consider ancient philosophy. Both Socrates and Aristotle conceived of wisdom as a kind of state that one could achieve. For Socrates wisdom involved seeing past the illusion of reality to the metaphysical forms behind it. However, he saw this as a situation one could succeed in getting for oneself: leaving Plato's cave meant (for a time) existing in a world of understanding where the nature of things was clearer. In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle describes virtue as a state defined by the mean in all things. "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean." While wisdom is not necessarily virtue, one is a part of the other, and so whatever wisdom is virtue is likely to be too.

For Descartes and Berkeley, wisdom is no longer a state— it is an action or activity. That activity for Descartes is the endless careful examination of one's presuppositions and the striving for a better unqualified understanding of the universe. For Berkeley, wisdom is the action of looking to God and seeing and reflecting His wisdom.

Finally, the wisdom of Hume and Kant, who were born after Descartes and Berkeley, appears to be neither an action nor an state, but an opinion, or perhaps an object which one possesses. Hume spoke out against the so-called philosophers who are foolish precisely because they think so much of themselves. Wisdom is found in not falling into the seductive pit-traps of

past abstract thinkers. Kant's describes in depth the rules for attaining wisdom. However, these rules provide neither state (they cannot form the metaphysical essence of a person), nor do they become wisdom only in their doing. Wisdom is found in the will to follow the right rules, which is the sort of opinion which necessarily drives toward action, but it is not the action itself.

7.2 Accuracy and Precision

Classifying the difference between modern philosophers and ancient philosophers is not easy. However, I believe that one difference is found in the distinction between accuracy and precision.

Accuracy characterizes things which are "on target" or correct. In terms of philosophy, I mean by accuracy a mode of philosophy which is less-than-firm, even vague, but which is seen as very true. In contrast, precision refers more to the care to which predictions are exact or sharply defined. In terms of philosophy, a precise philosophy is one that is as unambiguous as possible, constructed so carefully that it cannot be attacked.

Modern philosophers are much more critical, it seems, than ancient philosophers, both of themselves, their ideas, and other philosophers. They are fundamentally more concerned with being correct, or precise, than being true, or accurate.

The modern ideal of, as Jonathon Swift described it, having only "cloaths of [their] own

cutting out and sowing” is for the purpose of weeding out imprecision. According to the same work, Battle of the Books, Plato responds, “By G—, he believ’d them”: though they had made their philosophical clothes themselves, they were little more than rags with respect to the truth.

In terms of wisdom, this suggests why wisdom is more strongly based on knowledge for modern philosophers than earlier philosophies, which use the connections between wisdom and virtue more strongly.

7.3 Other Connections

All modern philosophers conceive of wisdom as something that is attained only through constant, continuing thought (even if that thought is in the form of skepticism, as with Hume). Wisdom cannot be stumbled upon, and is easily lost. This is related to Descartes’ doctrine of doubting, without which the confusion of perceptions infiltrates one’s wisdom.

Second, wisdom is something which can be attained by anyone, and which permeates all aspects of how a person interacts with the world. Nothing inherent in an individual is related to the ability for that individual to be wise. In addition, there is no place where the principles that lead to wisdom, and of which wisdom is formed, do not apply. Whether through the supremacy of reason or of the senses, wisdom applies to all interactions with the world. This, I suspect, is related to Descartes’s ideal of looking to God: the truth in

wisdom shines on any who care to be blinded by it.