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## Wisdom of the Ages

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Wisdom has many faces, but perhaps the most familiar would be that of an older man with a strong, kind face, a steady expression, a profound beard, and eyes at once serious and laughing. So Yeats imagined some Chinese sages — “their ancient eyes, their ancient, glittering eyes were gay.” So too we might imagine a Confucius, Moses, Socrates, or Einstein, and so film directors have played on old associations when depicting figures like Gandalf or Dumbledore. In anthropomorphizing wisdom as an older person, we are no different from the vast majority of cultures, as elders are usually considered wise: the grandparents, veterans, senators (from Latin *senex*), the ancestors who were there at the beginning of the tribe. “You cannot put a wise head on young shoulders” goes the Irish proverb, and so too we talk of “modern science” but of “ancient wisdom,” as if wisdom could best be found among those peoples whose civilizations matured over centuries, like the ancient Chinese, Indians, Egyptians, or Greeks.

There are exceptions to stereotypes, of course, and in mentioning the Greeks we should not forget that they imagined wisdom not only as a bearded Socrates, but even more potently as a beautiful goddess, stern in her virginity and inaccessibility: the goddess of wisdom, Pallas Athena. The notion that women can have access to a deeper, more intuitive knowledge is a widespread one. (See “Athena’s Surprising Portfolio,” page 10.)

“Power comes from the people,” the modern democrat says, but an even deeper intuition is that wisdom comes from the people. For as a group it is the common folk who have the greatest pool of experiences. Their collective knowledge, refined over generations, is enshrined in shared customs, laws, songs, sayings, myths, legends, and national histories — in short, in a way of life that informs consciousness and provides much guidance to individuals. The central notion that “the people are wise” is hardly ever stated explicitly, yet it is reflected in myriad ways. Works of literature draw

inspiration from popular sayings, legends, and characters. Democratic institutions like the popular vote or the jury of peers are tenable only when the “wisdom of crowds” is respected. Or, in our own economic times, we hear of the “wisdom of markets,” by which decisions are made by a seemingly collective intelligence whose “knowledge” is ultimately more effective than all but the most exceptional investors or central planners.

Historically, a people’s traditional wisdom has flowed into cultural forms of infinite variety. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the so-called wisdom literature so common among ancient peoples from China to Egypt. Most influential in the West, however, have been the Hebrew books of wisdom, especially Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. In this genre “wisdom” is predominantly worldly and practical, and the archetypical wise person is a king. When God offers to grant King Solomon any wish, Solomon replies, “Give me an understanding heart to judge your people, that I may discern between good and evil.” So legend has it that Solomon chose wisdom over power and wealth, and by this judicious choice got all three.

Proverbs is the most typical representative of wisdom literature, and in it we hear Solomon advising his son on how best to face life. Fear God, respect your parents, obey the king, be honest, be slow to anger, work for peace, be kind to others (especially the poor), do not waste wealth on drink or prostitutes, provide for the future, be cautious, speak deliberately, do not gossip or boast, do not sleep late or eat the bread of idleness, work hard (like the “wise ants”), find an industrious, God-fearing wife (for she will be “more precious than rubies”), educate your children, and hope for a head of gray hair (the “crown of old age”). If he does all this, Solomon says, his son can expect to gain honor, health, long life, and wealth, for all these are the fruits of wisdom. There are a few flashes of humor in Solomon’s lecture: “As the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard on his bed.” But in general Proverbs is a somber book and its keynote is solemnity itself: “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

This is a pregnant phrase that has often been repeated as the distillation of Hebrew wisdom. It expresses the intuition that Yahweh is distant, inscrutable, powerful, and that human beings do best by obeying the law He set down. Human beings may take pride in their power and knowledge but should remember that they control little. In Ecclesiastes, the speaker is again Solomon, but he has grown bitter in his wisdom:

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem: “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” What does man gain from all his labor in which he labors under the sun? One generation goes, and another generation comes; but the earth remains forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hurries to its place where it rises.... That which has been is that which shall be; and that which has been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.

Financial crises, pestilence, war — all will happen again. What can one do but endure? “In much wisdom is much grief. One who increases knowledge, increases sorrow.” Wisdom is not now confident advice on how to succeed in life, for human life is of small significance. Rather, the truly wise will seek some higher revelation of purpose. This kind of religiosity is not the “opium of the people” (pace Marx), but in fact a terrible burden.

The Greeks had their wisdom literature in the works of the poet Hesiod, and other poets, like Homer, were considered the “teachers of Greece.” But from around the time of Socrates, poetry began to be superseded by philosophy as the highest form of wisdom. The poets told stories about gods and heroes, but the philosophers sought explicit theories about the cosmos and man’s proper place within it. Philosophia is a Greek word, of course, meaning “love of wisdom.” Through the many centuries of Greco-Roman culture, to be a philosopher was to love wisdom above all else. To be wise was to have a comprehensive vision about the cosmos and to live one’s life in accordance with it.

Socrates is the most famous face of Greek philosophy. He went to his execution in the belief that “the unexamined life is not worth living”: without philosophy, one would be hardly human. Socrates’ integrity impressed his whole generation, and perhaps no one more than Plato. One theory is that Plato interpreted Socrates’ search for objective definitions as in fact a quest for “Forms” or “Ideas”: the universal, timeless essences that give reality to and differentiate particular entities. It is by the Idea of justice, for example, that actions like telling the truth or paying a debt can be termed “just.” For Plato, philosophy was the search for these Ideas, and wisdom the immediate knowledge of them. In particular, the wise person “sees” the Idea of the good — the ultimate reality, cause of knowledge and existence. Abstract disciplines like mathematics and dialectic are the best training for this wisdom. At the same time, Plato insists that the wise are transformed by their knowledge of the good; they alone really understand why virtues like justice or temperance are good, and therefore their knowledge will make them effortlessly virtuous. For Plato, a state can be wise only if ruled by a philosophically wise elite.

Plato’s ideal seamlessly unites theoretical knowledge with practical ability, but his trumpet call for philosopher-kings would not be taken up by his student Aristotle, who shows his allegiance to “common sense” by firmly separating wisdom into two different types, practical and theoretical. For Aristotle, each virtue is a mean between vices, a way of balancing opposing passions. Courage, for example, is a mean between cowardice and recklessness, between excessive fear and excessive fearlessness; the courageous person is neither fearful nor utterly fearless before danger, but remains resolute and self-possessed. Analyzing many virtues in this way, Aristotle concluded that without virtue, one cannot live well: the world is full of terrors, for example, and so an absolute coward would not dare get out of bed in the morning. Cultivating the virtues is the most practical thing one can do. But chief among these practical virtues is phronesis: practical wisdom, or *prudentia* in Latin. Phronesis is an elusive quality of mind. It may come with experience, but it cannot be reduced to a rule. There is no algorithm for being wise. Indeed, the desire for such an algorithm in this uncertain, changeable world is one sure sign of folly.

In this Aristotle’s own practical good sense has impressed many readers. Even more impressive were his scientific accomplishments in logic, biology, and psychology, and this theoretical knowledge may have made him more partial to the second type of wisdom he delineates: *sophia*, or wisdom proper. Practical wisdom deals with things that change (e.g., one’s fluctuating financial situation) but theoretical wisdom is directed toward what does not change: mathematical and intellectual truths, the heavens and natural laws, God. Knowledge of the stars’ paths is not at all necessary, yet it is the best and most compelling type of knowledge. It fulfils our nature as “rational animals,” for the *sophia* constituted by logic, mathematics, physics, and metaphysics will raise the mind to the serene self-sufficient type of thought that, Aristotle speculated, was the essence of God. Theoretical wisdom thus raises us from animality to something more like the divine.

This vision of the wise person at harmony with existence would be varied in many ways by different Greek philosophers, as well as by later thinkers like Spinoza and Hegel. The intellectualism of the Greeks was not quite in harmony with a very different vision, however. Jesus’s teachings are in some respects a continuation of Hebrew wisdom; indeed, the simple language of the Parable of the Lilies seems worlds away from Aristotle’s technical proof of the existence of God from motion. From the beginning then, Christian wisdom has often contrasted Christ’s simplicity with the needless complexity represented by Greek philosophy. Saint Paul famously writes, “[T]he Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.” Later, Tertullian would ask indignantly, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” If Jesus spoke to fishermen, then surely ordinary people could understand his words without the help of the metaphysicians.

For his followers, however, the attempt to harmonize Scripture with Greek philosophy would remain a necessary and fruitful one. In this the Middle Ages was dominated by two figures. Saint Augustine

made wisdom (*sapientia*) the highest of life's seven stages, when the eye of the soul looks upon God with intimate love: "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in thee." The road to this beatific vision includes not only Scripture but also a judicious study of pagan authors, especially Plato, whose writings seemed most sympathetic to the mystical ardor of the earlier Middle Ages. Augustinian theology was the dominant paradigm in Western Europe from the fifth to the twelfth centuries AD, influencing kings, popes, abbots, and laity alike. But with the rediscovery of more Greek texts from the twelfth century, Aristotle's reputation began to overshadow that of Plato. Saint Thomas Aquinas adopted Aristotle as "the philosopher" and set out to Christianize *phronesis* and *sophia* as *prudentia* and *sapientia*, respectively. Agreeing with the Greeks that wisdom is the highest human attainment, Aquinas opens his *Summa Theologiae* with the claim: "Sacred doctrine (i.e., theology) is called wisdom (*sapientia*) in the highest degree." As with Aristotelian *sophia*, Thomistic *sapientia* is knowledge of the changeless, notably God. But unlike Aristotle, Aquinas makes physics and metaphysics subordinate to the study of Scripture and the Fathers: the Christian theologian accepts traditional writings as authoritative and seeks to harmonize their various statements with each other and with pagan insights to form a single, coherent whole — a *Summa*, summarizing human wisdom in its totality.

This approach was effectively shared by most thinkers of medieval Christendom. In the concise phrase of Saint Anselm, "faith seeks understanding": faith in the Gospels prepares for disciplined thinking about them and this work of interpretative understanding in turn deepens faith. It is remarkable that this approach was shared by both medieval Jewish thinkers (like Maimonides) and Muslims (like Averroës), who also turned to Greek philosophy to understand their respective faith traditions. And for all these "peoples of the Book" there remains a wisdom beyond human wisdom: God is the true wisdom, and for all the proofs of rational theology, we only can see Him "as through a glass darkly," except in those moments of clarity when we are granted grace and for a few moments glimpse the life of things.

With revolutions brought about by the fall of Constantinople, rediscovery of pagan antiquity, discovery of the New World, circumnavigation of the globe, and the Protestant Reformation, a new spirit gradually overtook European society. Increasingly it seemed that the globe and even the cosmos as a whole were a single entity, filled with astonishing variety but not obviously presided over by a transcendent God. This evolution of perspective strengthened a sense of freedom, adventure, and human capacities. Perhaps something of the individualism of the great explorers, conquistadors, and merchant princes can be heard in what has become the prime slogan (and cliché) of modern thought: "I think, therefore I am." For Descartes this is the indubitable statement, the rock on which mankind will build its new, scientific society. In it also is a tone of self-assertion absent from ancient and medieval wisdom. For Descartes and many of his modern successors, the human individual is not only the beginning, but becomes more and more the final end of endeavor.

Like Aristotle, Descartes privileges theoretical understanding of first causes over a merely practical *phronesis*. But Descartes does not mention God, and he simply associates wisdom with the totality of science ("a perfect knowledge of all that man can know"). Moreover, his real emphasis is on the practical applications of this knowledge "for the preservation of [human] health and the discovery of all the arts." In Descartes' image, wisdom fully grown is like a tree, where metaphysics is the root, physics the trunk, and mechanics, medicine, and morals the three fruit-bearing branches. In other words, the root of wisdom is the indubitable "I think." The thinking self formulates the propositions of a mathematical physics, quantifies all aspects of nature, and applies mechanical principles to agriculture, transport, medicine, even to human morality and politics. Thus, wisdom, i.e., the perfection of the sciences, will transform human beings into the "masters and possessors of nature," which they will control as precisely as any man-made machine.

These ideas are presented most famously in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which Descartes composed very carefully, in six parts, as if in deliberate mimicry of God's creation in Genesis. If so,

then the inaugural “wisdom” of Descartes is that human beings should become shapers of creation also, imitators or rivals of God in knowledge and power. A similar dynamic is found in Francis Bacon; his phrase “knowledge is power” has become one of the central slogans of modernity. Underlying it is the simple assumption that knowledge is good, power is good, and that to increase both is to increase human happiness, well-being, and worth.

Mankind should perfect itself, and use nature to this end: this was the principle by which the eighteenth-century Enlightenment understood past, present, and future. It would be strengthened in the nineteenth century with the appearance of Darwinian ideas, in a universe composed of matter in motion, where some collocations of matter are better adapted for survival than others. And, if nature “selects” the “fittest” for a given environment, would it not be best for human beings to select the traits that would best serve human goals? For some, this is a no-brainer. For others, the appearance of genocide, global wars, nuclear weapons, pandemics, and the threat of ecological collapse only highlight the naïveté of Cartesian rationalism. Which is right we do not yet know. Will the modern project of “mastering” nature prove to be humanity’s highest wisdom, or its most catastrophic experiment in hubris?

In terms of the history of an idea, it is a remarkable fact that most modern thinkers (in the West at least) have not been much concerned with the virtue of wisdom. Their dominant concerns have been elsewhere, as new concepts captured the imagination: Reason, Natural Law, Science, Wissenschaft, Technology. But the last thirty years have seen something of a renewal of academic interest in the idea of wisdom, with many calls for a “scientific study of wisdom,” as opposed to the older studies based on religious and philosophical traditions. Yet the basic questions are still the old, recurrent ones: What is wisdom? How can an individual be wise? How can a society be wise? Indeed, in some respects we return full circle to the words of Solomon. Fear is once again the beginning of wisdom, but now it is the fear of war, famine, pestilence, flood, and other man-made apocalypses. For many, the global challenges of the twenty-first century require a combination of many qualities: an integrated theoretical knowledge; intelligent judgment or phronesis in applying theory to particular needs; reflection on what our needs really are; openness to new possibilities; humility before the complexities of nature and the human soul; calm; and perhaps most of all intuition into what is good, that immediate “knowledge of good and evil” that is the kernel of wisdom. In the oracular words of Robert Sternberg, 2003 president of the American Psychological Association: “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.”

But it would be foolish to end so bleakly, so let us paraphrase Yeats, recalling that in many traditions, the wise “are always the merry, save by an evil chance.” In adversity fools grow angry or despair, but wisdom gives one the strength to smile and even to laugh through the worst. So if science has christened us humans the “wise, wise hominid,” then let’s not be monkeys but start to put the sapiens back in homo sapiens sapiens.

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