Wisdom
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Wisdom or sapience is the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and insight.[1] Wisdom has been regarded as one of four cardinal virtues; and as a virtue, it is a habit or disposition to perform the action with the highest degree of adequacy under any given circumstance with the limitation of error in any given action. This implies a possession of knowledge, or the seeking of knowledge to apply to the given circumstance. This involves an understanding of people, objects, events, situations, and the willingness as well as the ability to apply perception, judgement, and action in keeping with the understanding of what is the optimal course of action. It often requires control of one's emotional reactions (the "passions") so that the universal principle of reason prevails to determine one's action. In short, wisdom is a disposition to find the truth coupled with an optimum judgement as to what actions should be taken.

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Definitions
The Oxford English Dictionary defines wisdom as "Capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgement in the choice of means and ends; sometimes, less strictly, sound sense, esp. in practical affairs: opp. to folly;" also "Knowledge (esp. of a high or abstruse kind); enlightenment, learning, erudition."[2] Charles Haddon Spurgeon defined wisdom as "the right use of knowledge".[3] Robert I. Sutton and Andrew Hargadon defined the "attitude of wisdom" as "acting with knowledge while doubting what one knows".[4]

**Philosophical perspectives**

The ancient Greeks considered wisdom to be an important virtue, personified as the goddesses Metis and Athena. Athena is said to have sprung from the head of Zeus. She was portrayed as strong, fair, merciful, and chaste.[5] To Socrates and Plato, philosophy was literally the love of Wisdom (philo-sophia). This permeates Plato's dialogues, especially The Republic, in which the leaders of his proposed utopia are to be philosopher kings, rulers who understand the Form of the Good and possess the courage to act accordingly. Aristotle, in his Metaphysics, defined wisdom as the understanding of causes, i.e. knowing why things are a certain way, which is deeper than merely knowing that things are a certain way.[6]

The ancient Romans also valued wisdom. It was personified in Minerva, or Pallas. She also represents skillful knowledge and the virtues, especially chastity. Her symbol was the owl which is still a popular representation of wisdom, because it can see in darkness. She was said to be born from Jupiter's forehead.[7]

Wisdom is also important within Christianity. Jesus emphasized it.[8][9] Paul the Apostle, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, argued that there is both secular and divine wisdom, urging Christians to pursue the latter. Prudence, which is intimately related to wisdom, became one of the four cardinal virtues of Catholicism. The Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas considered wisdom to be the "father" (i.e. the cause, measure, and form) of all virtues.

In the Inuit tradition, developing wisdom was one of the aims of teaching. An Inuit Elder said that a person became wise when they could see what needed to be done and do it successfully without being told what to do. In many cultures, the name for third molars, which are the last teeth to grow, is etymologically linked with wisdom, e.g., as in the English wisdom tooth.

**Educational perspectives**

Public schools in the US have an approach to character education. Eighteenth century philosophers such as Benjamin Franklin, referred to this as training wisdom and virtue. Traditionally, schools share the responsibility to build character and wisdom along with parents and the community.[10]

Nicholas Maxwell, a contemporary philosopher in the United Kingdom, advocates that academia ought to alter its focus from the acquisition of knowledge to seeking and promoting wisdom, which he defines as the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others.[11] He teaches that new knowledge and technological know-how increase our power to act which, without wisdom, may cause human suffering and death as well as human benefit. Wisdom is the application of knowledge to attain a positive goal by receiving instruction in governing oneself.

**Psychological perspectives**
Psychologists have gathered data on commonly held beliefs or folk theories about wisdom. These analyses indicate that although "there is an overlap of the implicit theory of wisdom with intelligence, perceptiveness, spirituality and shrewdness, it is evident that wisdom is an expertise in dealing with difficult questions of life and adaptation to the complex requirements." Baltes et al. in 2002 through *Wisdom: its structure and function in regulating lifespan successful development* defined "Wisdom is the ability to deal with the contradictions of a specific situation and to assess the consequences of an action for themselves and for others. It is achieved when in a concrete situation, a balance between intrapersonal, inter-personal and institutional interests can be prepared.

Researchers in the field of positive psychology have defined wisdom as the coordination of "knowledge and experience" and "its deliberate use to improve well being." With this definition, wisdom is further defined as a multidimensional construct with the following facets:

- Problem Solving with self-knowledge and sustainable actions.
- Contextual, sincerity to the circumstances with knowledge of its negative and positive aspects (or constraints).
- Value based consistent actions with knowledge of diversity in ethical opinions.
- Tolerance towards uncertainty in life with unconditional acceptance.
- Empathy with oneself to understand one's own emotions (or to be emotionally oriented), morals...etc. and others feelings including the ability to see oneself as part of a larger whole.

Wisdom leads a person to overcome feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, anger or aggression by non-understanding of external elements and internal acknowledgement. It leads to a change from the experience of meaninglessness to meaningful goals, prospects for coping with critical life events and to engage constructively with complex life problems. John Vervaeke has argued through cognitive science of wisdom that, when basic relevance realization processes that underlie cognition is fed back onto themselves and made self-referential/differentiated reflection with the problems facing and its dimensions, leads to enhanced insight abilities associated with wisdom.

Dr. B. Legesse et al., a neuropsychiatrist at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School, offers "a theoretical definition that takes into account many cultural, religious, and philosophical themes is that wisdom represents a demonstrated superior ability to understand the nature and behavior of things, people, or events." He states "this results in an increased ability to predict behavior or events which then may be used to benefit self or others." He furthermore adds "there is more often a desire to share the accrued benefits with a larger group for the purpose of promoting survival, cohesion, or well-being of that group. The benefits do not result from malicious or antisocial intents or inequitable behavior. Environmental factors, such as family, education, socioeconomic status, culture, and religion, are involved in generating the milieu in which the personal value system develops. Many of these same factors also influence how a given community decides whether wisdom
is present or not. This model of wisdom relies on the individual’s ability to generate a mental representation of the self (cognitive, emotional, and physical), the external world, and the dynamic relationship of the self with the external world." Dr. Legesse proposes that "the neural (brain) systems critical to enable these functions are distributed but heavily dependent on those that support memory, learning, understanding other people’s mental states (Theory of Mind), and assigning relative value to information." The neuroanatomy of wisdom he says depends on "the three frontosubcortical neural networks, the limbic system, and the mirror neuron system" which "are of particular importance for supporting these activities." He describes the function of this neural system as working "in concert to weigh and estimate the risks and benefits of various mentally modeled courses of action to generate wisdom." It was proposed that "the neural substrates of empathy may be conceptualized as biasing the information processing network in favor of valuing others, interpersonal communication, cooperation, and community."[20]

Many, but not all, studies find that adults' self-ratings of perspective/wisdom do not depend on age.[17][21] This stands in contrast to the popular notion that wisdom increases with age,[21] supported by a recent study showing that regardless of their education, IQ or gender, older adults possess better reasoning about societal and interpersonal conflicts.[22]

**Sapience**

Sapience is often defined as wisdom, or the ability of an organism or entity to act with appropriate judgement, a mental faculty which is a component of intelligence or alternatively may be considered an additional faculty, apart from intelligence, with its own properties. Robert Sternberg[23] has segregated the capacity for judgement from the general qualifiers for intelligence, which is closer to cognizant aptitude than to wisdom. Displaying sound judgement in a complex, dynamic environment is a hallmark of wisdom.

The word *sapience* is derived from the Latin *sapientia*, meaning "wisdom".[24] Related to this word is the Latin verb *sapere*, meaning "to taste, to be wise, to know"; the present participle of *sapere* forms part of *Homo sapiens*, the Latin binomial nomenclature created by Carl Linnaeus to describe the human species. Linnaeus had originally given humans the species name of *diurnus*, meaning man of the day. But he later decided that the dominating feature of humans was wisdom, hence application of the name *sapiens*. His chosen biological name was intended to emphasize man's uniqueness and separation from the rest of the animal kingdom.

In fantasy fiction and science fiction, sapience often describes an essential property that bestows "personhood" onto a non-human. It indicates that a computer, alien, mythical creature or other similar individual merits treatment as a being with capabilities and desires equal to any human character. These sapient, non-human characters are often entitled to, or eligible to receive, full civil rights. The words "sentience", "self-awareness", and "consciousness" are used in similar ways in science fiction.[25]

**Religious perspectives**

Some religions have specific teachings relating to wisdom.

**Ancient Egypt**

Sia represents the personification or god of wisdom in the traditional mythology adhered to in Ancient Egypt.

**Bahá'í Faith**

Sapience is derived from the Latin *sapientia*, meaning "wisdom",
Wisdom and the acquiring of it is mentioned frequently in the Bahá’í scriptures. According to the scriptures, "The essence of wisdom is the fear of God, the dread of His scourge and punishment, and the apprehension of His justice and decree."[26] Wisdom is seen as a light, that casts away darkness, and "its dictates must be observed under all circumstances",[27] other concepts associated with wisdom and being wise are considering "the regard of place and the utterance of discourse according to measure and state" and not believing or accepting what other people say so easily.[28]

One may obtain knowledge and wisdom through God, his Word, and his Divine Manifestation and the source of all learning is the knowledge of God.[29]

Buddhism

Buddhist scriptures teach that a wise person is endowed with good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, and good mental conduct. (AN 3:2) A wise person does actions that are unpleasant to do but give good results, and doesn’t do actions that are pleasant to do but give bad results (AN 4:115). Wisdom is the antidote to the self-chosen poison of ignorance. The Buddha has much to say on the subject of wisdom including:

- He who arbitrates a case by force does not thereby become just (established in Dhamma). But the wise man is he who carefully discriminates between right and wrong.[30]
- He who leads others by nonviolence, righteously and equitably, is indeed a guardian of justice, wise and righteous.[31]
- One is not wise merely because he talks much. But he who is calm, free from hatred and fear, is verily called a wise man.[32]
- By quietude alone one does not become a sage (muni) if he is foolish and ignorant. But he who, as if holding a pair of scales, takes the good and shuns the evil, is a wise man; he is indeed a muni by that very reason. He who understands both good and evil as they really are, is called a true sage.[33]

To recover the original supreme wisdom of self-nature covered by the self-imposed three dusty poisons (greed, anger, ignorance) Buddha taught to his students the threefold training by turning greed into generosity and discipline, anger into kindness and meditation, ignorance into wisdom. As the Sixth Patriarch of Chán Buddhism, Huineng, said in his Platform Sutra,"Mind without dispute is self-nature discipline, mind without disturbance is self-nature meditation, mind without ignorance is self-nature wisdom."

Christianity

In Christian theology, "wisdom" (Hebrew: chokhmah, Greek: Sophia, Latin: Sapientia) describes an aspect of God, or the theological concept regarding the wisdom of God.

There is an oppositional element in Christian thought between secular wisdom and Godly wisdom. Paul the Apostle states that worldly wisdom thinks the claims of Christ to be foolishness. However, to those who are "on the path to salvation" Christ represents the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:17–31) Also, Wisdom is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit according to Anglican, Catholic, and Lutheran belief. 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 gives an alternate list of nine virtues, among which wisdom is one.

The book of Proverbs in the Bible primarily focuses on wisdom, and was primarily written by one of the wisest kings according to Jewish history, King Solomon. Proverbs is found in the Old Testament section of the Bible
and is written in a sort of poetic way, giving direction on how to handle various aspects of life; one’s relationship with God, marriage, dealing with finances, work, friendships and persevering in difficult situations faced in life.

[34] According to King Solomon, wisdom is gained from God, “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding” Proverbs 2:6. And through God’s wise aide, one can have a better life: “He holds success in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones” Proverbs 2:7-8. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” Proverbs 3:5-6. Solomon basically states that with the wisdom one receives from God, one will be able to find success and happiness in life.

[35] There are various verses in Proverbs that contain parallels of what God loves, which is wise, and what God does not love, which is foolish. For example in the area of good and bad behaviour Proverbs states, “The way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, But He loves him who pursues righteousness (Proverbs 15:9). In relation to fairness and business it is stated that, “A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, But a just weight is His delight” (Proverbs 11:1; cf. 20:10,23). On the truth it is said, “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, But those who deal faithfully are His delight” (12:22; cf. 6:17,19). These are a few examples of what, according to Solomon, are good and wise in the eyes of God, or bad and foolish, and in doing these good and wise things, one becomes closer to God by living in an honorable and kind manner.

[34] King Solomon continues his teachings of wisdom in the book of Ecclesiastes, which is considered one of the most depressing books of the Bible. Solomon discusses his exploration of the meaning of life and fulfillment, as he speaks of life’s pleasures, work, and materialism, yet concludes that it is all meaningless. “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher [Solomon]. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless’…For with much wisdom comes much sorrow, the more knowledge, the more grief” (Ecclesiastes 1:2,18) Solomon concludes that all life’s pleasures and riches, and even wisdom, mean nothing if there is no relationship with God.

[36] The book of James, written by the apostle James, is said to be the New Testament version of the book of Proverbs, in that it is another book that discusses wisdom. It reiterates Proverbs message of wisdom coming from God by stating, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” James 1:5. James also explains how wisdom helps one acquire other forms of virtue, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” James 3:17. In addition, James focuses on using this God-given wisdom to perform acts of service to the less fortunate.

A part from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and James, other main books of wisdom in the Bible are Job, Psalms, and 1 and 2 Corinthians, which give lessons on gaining and using wisdom through difficult situations. But wisdom is not limited to only these books in the Bible, no matter the book, words of wisdom can be found. Through devotional time or meditation through the reading and reflection of the Bible and other readings that analyze the Bible, one can gain wisdom in order to help Christians become more aware, insightful and happy in life.

**Confucianism**

According to Confucius (551–479 BCE), one can learn wisdom by three methods:

- reflection (the noblest)
- imitation (the easiest)
- experience (the bitterest)

One does not dispense wisdom oneself unless asked by another. This means that a wise man never tells his wisdom unless asked person to person.

According to the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Confucius also said:

"Love of learning is akin to wisdom. To practice with vigor is akin to humanity. To know to be shameful is akin to courage (zhi, ren, yi... three of Mengzi's sprouts of virtue)."

Compare this with the Confucian classic *Great Learning*, which begins with: "The Way of learning to be great consists in manifesting the clear character, loving the people, and abiding in the highest good." One can clearly see the correlation with the Roman virtue prudence, especially if one interprets "clear character" as "clear conscience". (From Chan's Sources of Chinese Philosophy).

**Hinduism**

Wisdom in Hinduism is considered a state of mind and soul where a person achieves liberation.

The god of wisdom is Ganesha and the goddess of knowledge is Saraswati.

The Sanskrit verse to attain knowledge is:

असतो मा सदगमय | Asatō mā sadgamaya
तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय | tamaśo mā jyōtirgamaya
मृत्योंमाओ अमृतं गमय | mṛtyōṁmā amṛtaṁ gamaya
ॐ शांतिः शांतिः शांतिः | Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

- *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣat* 1.3.28

"O Lord Lead me from the unreal to the real.
Lead me from darkness to light.
Lead me from death to immortality.
May there be peace, peace, and perfect peace".

*Brihdarkaranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28.

Wisdom in Hinduism is knowing oneself as the truth, basis for the entire Creation, i.e., of *Shristi*. In other words, wisdom simply means a person with Self-awareness as the one who witnesses the entire creation in all its facets and forms. Further it means realization that an individual through right conduct and right living over an unspecified period comes to realize their true relationship with the creation and the *Paramatma* who rules it.

**Islam**

In Islam, Wisdom is deemed as one of the greatest gifts humankind can enjoy. The Quran states:

"He gives wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good. And none will remember except those of understanding."
There are a number of verses where the Qur'an specifically talks about the nature of wisdom. In Surah 22 Al-Hajj (The Pilgrimage) it is said, "Have they not travelled in the land, and have they hearts wherewith to feel and ears wherewith to hear? For indeed it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts, which are within the bosoms, that grow blind." (verse 46). In another Surah Al-’Annâm (The Cattle), it said:

"Say: "Come, I will rehearse what Allah (God) hath (really) prohibited you from": Join not anything as equal with Him; be good to your parents; kill not your children on a plea of want;— We provide sustenance for you and for them;— come not nigh to shameful deeds, whether open or secret; take not life, which Allah hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law: thus doth He command you, that ye may learn wisdom"

— Qur'an, sura 6 (Al-An'am), ayat 151

**Judaism**

The word wisdom (חכם) is mentioned 222 times in the Hebrew Bible. It was regarded as one of the highest virtues among the Israelites along with kindness (חסד) and justice (צדק). Both the books of Proverbs and Psalms urge readers to obtain and to increase in wisdom.

In the Hebrew Bible, wisdom is represented by Solomon, who asks God for wisdom in 2 Chronicles 1:10. Much of the Book of Proverbs, a book of wise sayings, is attributed to Solomon. In Proverbs 9:10, the fear of YHWH is called the beginning of wisdom. In Proverbs 1:20, there is also reference to wisdom personified in female form, "Wisdom calls aloud in the streets, she raises her voice in the marketplaces." In Proverbs 8:22–31, this personified wisdom is described as being present with God before creation began and even taking part in creation itself.

The Talmud teaches that a wise person is a person who can foresee the future. *Nolad* is the Hebrew word for "future," but also the Hebrew word for *birth*, so one rabbinic interpretation of the teaching is that a wise person is one who can foresee the consequences of his/her choices (i.e. can "see the future" that he/she "gives birth" to).[39]

**Taoism**

In Taoism, wisdom is construed as adherence to the Three Treasures (Taoism): charity, simplicity, and humility.

Knowing others is intelligence;  
knowing yourself is true wisdom.  
Mastering others is strength;  
mastering yourself is true power.  
Tao Te Ching, 33, tr. S. Mitchell

**Others**

In Mesopotamian religion and mythology, Enki, also known as Ea, was the God of wisdom and intelligence. Wisdom was achieved by restoring balance.
In Norse mythology, the god Odin is especially known for his wisdom, often acquired through various hardships and ordeals involving pain and self-sacrifice. In one instance he plucked out an eye and offered it to Mímir, guardian of the well of knowledge and wisdom, in return for a drink from the well.[40] In another famous account, Odin hanged himself for nine nights from Yggdrasil, the World Tree that unites all the realms of existence, suffering from hunger and thirst and finally wounding himself with a spear until he gained the knowledge of runes for use in casting powerful magic.[41] He was also able to acquire the mead of poetry from the giants, a drink of which could grant the power of a scholar or poet, for the benefit of gods and mortals alike.[40]

See also

- Analogy
- Bildung
- Book of Wisdom
- Consciousness
- Ecological wisdom
- Human condition
- Metacognition
- Perspicacity
- Philosophy
- Sapere aude
- Sapiens (disambiguation)
- School of Hard Knocks
- Sentience
- The Wisdom of Crowds

References

3. Wikiquote:Charles Spurgeon#Quotes
6. But note that two thousand years after Aristotle, Isaac Newton was forced to admit that "I have not yet been able to discover the cause of these properties of gravity"
11. knowledgetowisdom.org (http://www.knowledgetowisdom.org/), Friends of Wisdom "an association of people sympathetic to the idea that academic inquiry should help humanity acquire more wisdom by rational means" founded by Maxwell.
30. Dhammadapada v. 256
31. Dhammadapada v. 257
32. Dhammadapada v. 258
33. Dhammadapada v. 268–9

**External links**

- Wisdom (http://philpapers.org/browse/wisdom) at PhilPapers
- Wisdom (https://inpho.cogs.indiana.edu/idea/1544) at the Indiana Philosophy Ontology Project
- From Knowledge to Wisdom (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/from-knowledge-to-wisdom)
- Where is the Wisdom We have Lost in Knowledge? (http://www.foundationsmag.com/wisdom.html)
- Wisdom in Perspective (http://www.excaliburbooks.com)
- Ancient texts (http://www.ancienttexts.org/)

**Wikiquote** has quotations related to: **Wisdom**

**Wikiversity** has learning materials about **Wisdom**

Look up **wisdom** in Wiktionary, the free dictionary.

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Resources

- The Wisdom Page (http://www.wisdompage.com)
- Share Your Wisdom Here (http://www.wisdomation.com)
- The Defining Wisdom Project of the University of Chicago (http://www.wisdomresearch.org)


Categories: Ethical principles | Knowledge | Spirituality | Virtue

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