

Practical Wisdom: A Challenge to Conventional Ideas of Wisdom

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Abstract

Wisdom, according to conventional wisdom, is abstract, elusive, and powerful. It's big. It's important. Only exceptionally developed people achieve wisdom. However, wisdom is available to many of us much of the time if we know how to look for it and use it. That's because, contrary to conventional wisdom, wisdom is quite accessible – and also useful in our daily lives. It is eminently practical. It's how we can get out of or get through difficult interpersonal situations in ways that usually work. In this poster session I'll present my model of practical wisdom and its development with examples. I'll show some ways that we all can become more adept at accessing and using our wisdom. Wisdom may be developmental, complex, and not learned in ten easy steps. At the same time, small daily wisdom is around us all the time. We can – and should - take more advantage of it. Wisdom is for everyone.

We tend to think of wisdom as something unattainable for us and in the province of only very special people of exceptional cognitive and moral development. We envision some of the most outstanding people that have ever lived, such as Jesus or Gandhi or the Buddha or Martin Luther King, Jr. These people did extraordinary things for the world in the name of peace, and they have been remembered for it. What is it that separates us from them?

I am suggesting in this paper that wisdom lies on a continuum, like much else, from the extraordinary to the everyday. There are Olympic cross-country skiers, and then there's me. But we both ski! My point is that we all (most of us anyway) can exhibit wisdom in our lives, albeit on a small scale. A small scale is better than no scale because what wisdom does is make things go smoother. It is about optimal functioning among humans; it serves human flourishing. To sound trite, wisdom is the best we can be. Or, to adapt a line from Alcoholics Anonymous, wisdom is living to good purpose under all conditions.

Wisdom researchers are split into roughly two camps about the nature of wisdom. In one, wisdom is seen almost as a Platonic ideal (for example, Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000); in the other, it is viewed as characteristics of a person (Ardelt, 2000; Sternberg, 2003). My work lies with the latter camp as, in order to arrive at my model, I studied people nominated as thoughtful and insightful.

The wisdom model

The grounded theory study derived from interviews with 26 people and resulted in a definition and four-part model of wisdom with implications for practical use. My definition of wisdom is having sufficient awareness in a given situation or context to behave in ways that lead to broadly beneficial outcomes. Each of the major components of the model is included in this definition as can be seen below.

A salient feature of the model is the finding that wisdom is a multi-dimensional construct, all of whose components interact with each other. The four major components include a cognitive function (Discernment), an affective component (Respect), an active component (Engagement), and a reflective component (Transformation/Reflection) (Bassett, 2006).



Figure 1, “A Model of Practical Wisdom,” shows the complete model, but often when I am explaining it, I use the image of a tree, because trees are complex dynamic systems with recognizable parts that do certain tasks. (See Figure 2 “A Model of Practical Wisdom with Tree.”) If I cut off a branch, then it is a branch, not a tree any more. In autumn, the leaves fall on the ground, and they are the leaves of the tree, but not the tree itself which stands in majestic splendor all through the winter until the sap rises again.

The major parts of a tree: the trunk and branches, the leaves, the roots, and the fruits (apples, acorns, seeds—reproduction). Because it is straight and hard and definite, I call the trunk/branches the Discernment quality of wisdom. This is a cognitive dimension that is hard-edged sometimes. It requires objectivity and systemic seeing—how things work together.

Then there are the leaves that use photosynthesis to make food/energy for the plant and exhale oxygen. This is what I call the heart aspect of wisdom, the compassion side or Respect. The leaves interact with what is around them, blowing in the breeze, feeding the tree, drawing water up from the roots, putting life-giving oxygen out into the atmosphere. I use leaves as an image for the caring qualities of wisdom.

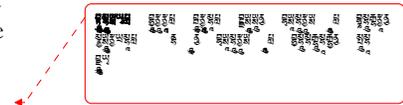
The fruits of the tree, whether they be pine seeds or acorns or pears, are the active component or Engagement. They are involved with the environment as they are used by us or other creatures for food or as they take root to make more of themselves. Here, in this analogy we find good judgment and actions based on fairness and justice. With its seeds or fruits, the tree is actively taking the next step beyond maintaining itself as a single system and becoming involved in what is around it. I call this Engagement.

Then we come to the roots of the tree, which serve several purposes. They keep it stable and they bring nutrients and water from the soil into the tree, but they are underground, and we cannot see them. This is the reflective part of wisdom, or what I call integrity. It is what is going on in our minds as we reflect on ourselves and our place or role in a situation with, as we become more mature, the recognition of the growing interdependence of all things. It is here that we find the self-knowledge and self-acceptance that allow us to recognize and shed (or at least minimize) the biases, assumptions, and projections that can color or distort our perceptions and prevent us from seeing clearly, which brings us right back to Discernment or the trunk of the tree. All the parts work together.

At the same time, as we work to see clearly, we cannot be a Bernie Madoff. Sure, he saw that people were willing to be suckers in his scheme, but his actions were not what you could call wise because what he did was for his own gain. When you have systems understanding and a good idea how things will turn out, part of wisdom is keeping in mind what is good for others.

While you are working for clearer seeing and deeper understanding and while you are holding other people’s interests in mind, you also have to make decisions or judgments; you have to be able to act with moral courage. And, there is always the need for reflection and being able to embrace paradox and uncertainty. All of these aspects of wisdom are always acting upon each other reciprocally.

Here is the definition again: wisdom is having sufficient awareness in a given situation or context to behave in ways that lead to broadly beneficial outcomes. In the definition, “having sufficient awareness” refers to Discernment, Respect and Reflection. It entails insight and empathy, including the ability to take another person’s point of view. Further, you need to know yourself and how you tend to act or react in various situations which includes knowing what gets in your way. The phrase “to behave” gives a person choices about action, including not acting or remaining silent, in a



particular situation. Finally, “broadly beneficial outcomes” means that behaviors are directed towards the greater good.

Practical wisdom

What does all of this mean for practical wisdom? First, it brings wisdom down to earth a bit, by breaking it into component parts, each of which can be negotiated and acted upon. (As the Sufis say, however, you can open the window but it does not mean that the breeze will come in. You can practice being wiser, but it does not mean that you will succeed.) Second, it shows us areas where we might think that we have some proficiency in wisdom and others that need to be developed and encouraged. Third, it gives us queries that we can use in everyday situations. For example, it is wise to ask yourself what is really going on in a particular set of circumstances. How might the other person involved be seeing the situation? What does it look like from their point of view? Then you can wonder if you have the moral courage to carry out what seems right to do. Is this decision based on your wanting to enhance your own ego? Whose good is at stake here?

Here is an example from my own life. Just before Valentine’s Day I was in the Walgreen’s parking lot and opened my rear car door to put some parcels in. The door tapped the one beside me, and the man inside opened his window and started yelling at me. “You hit my car! You should be more careful.” “I’m sorry,” I replied. “You shouldn’t do that!” “I’m sorry.” “I don’t like people hitting my car.” “There’s no damage,” I said. “You can’t see anything at all.” “You shouldn’t be so clumsy!” “Happy Valentine’s Day,” I said, smiling and waving and driving off, seeing an astonished face out of the corner of my eye.

This is certainly not great wisdom on the level of Abraham Lincoln, but it may give you an idea of how wisdom can work in ordinary ways. I saw that there was a very unhappy man who, no matter what I said or did, would continue to abuse the situation. There was sufficient awareness on my part of his being irritable and unlikely to change his mood, while at the same time I could see my own anger growing. I realized that I’d better leave or things would get worse. I then tried to shift the energy with a surprise positive statement and left before further deterioration could take place.

This is an example of small daily wisdom, the kind that most of us can access and use for our own benefit and for those around us. I suggest that we can all become more adept at being wiser on non-Olympian levels.

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Figure 1

A Model of Practical Wisdom

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(Please note that each of the cells relates to, interacts with, influences, and is influenced by any and all of the others.)

| WISDOM | | | | |
|------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Dimension | Discernment (Cognitive) | Respect (Affective) | Engagement (Active) | Reflection/ Transformation (Reflective) |
| Chief Descriptor | Objectivity | Openness & Acceptance | Involvement | Integrity |
| Proficiency | Insight Holistic thinking, systemic seeing into complexity Balanced interests | Multiple perspective-taking Compassion & caring/empathy/love Generosity of spirit/non-judgmental | Sound judgment & adept decision-making Actions based on fairness & justice Moral courage | Self-knowledge Self-acceptance Perspective on self as part of systems |
| Manifestation | Deep understanding of fundamental patterns and relationships, causes & consequences | Sense of gratitude Expanded sphere of consideration | Committed action for the common good | Embracing of paradox & uncertainty Ability to see beyond the self Growing recognition of interdependence |
| Queries | What are the facts? What's really going on in this situation? What's true? What's important here? What's right? | Whose point of view am I taking? How does someone else understand this situation? How can I relate to them with magnanimity? | What guides my actions? To what ends are my actions directed? What means do I use? What are the consequences of different decisions? | What are my values? What are my boundaries? What are my needs? How do I get outside of my ego? Who or what is the "I" that I think I am? What am I part of? |

DEFINITION: Wisdom is having sufficient awareness in a context or situation to behave in a ways that lead to broadly beneficial outcomes.

