

The Concept of Wisdom

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Abstract

The idea of wisdom is of central importance in philosophy. That is indicated by the fact that etymologically philosophy means love of wisdom. Though it is almost impossible to give a universally acceptable definition of wisdom yet we have to note that wisdom is connected with experience, knowledge and judgement. Judgement involves the ability to discern and it is at the core of wisdom. In the different traditions of world philosophy the importance of wisdom has been recognized right down from the ancient times. Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others explored the various dimensions of wisdom. St. Augustine explored the spiritual dimension of wisdom. Intuitive knowledge and scientific reasoning are also found to be associated with wisdom. In the Upanishads wisdom was viewed as the direct realization of the absolute reality. A philosopher is understood by Jacques Maritain as a man in search of wisdom and it seems that wisdom is a scarce commodity. A life in which wisdom is operative is thought to be a better life because here we have a higher level of fulfilment and a greater amount of happiness.

Keywords : Collective wisdom, individual wisdom, self examination, cardinal virtues, perennial philosophy, seven deadly sins.

Introduction

Since etymologically philosophy means 'love of wisdom', the idea of wisdom is deeply connected with philosophy. Wisdom does not appear to be something easily available. There is a social need for wisdom and yet as Jacques Maritain has pointed out, there is a scarcity of it. A conceptual analysis of wisdom is required and we are to know in what way it is related to experience and knowledge. We are to know in what way in the Western and also in the Indian traditions of philosophy attempts have been made to understand the nature and function of wisdom. Its relations with scientific knowledge, virtue and human predicament are to be investigated so that the social need for wisdom can be understood in the right perspective. The idea of wisdom also has a spiritual dimension. The folk tradition is also not bereft of concern with wisdom. In the folk tradition we do not find systematic philosophizing as such. But some proverbs, maxims and fables incorporate wisdom and they also exemplify how the folk mind in its own way may be concerned with certain philosophical issue touching our everyday life. Every culture and every society has its share of wisdom and this share of wisdom is not controlled by time as well.

The Definition of 'Wisdom'

Etymologically the word philosophy means 'love of wisdom' There are scores of definitions of philosophy, but the etymological root of philosophy is connected with wisdom. Collective wisdom as representing the group mind and individual wisdom as representing individual mind are both important for giving direction to human civilization. Though the idea of wisdom is of central importance in philosophy as well as in the cultural heritage of mankind yet finding a definition of wisdom is quite difficult. We may ask what distinguishes wisdom from knowledge. We may ask why a particular individual is regarded to be wise even though someone who we do not consider to possess wisdom may have greater factual knowledge. These questions cannot be answered easily.

The word 'wisdom' is defined in dictionary as follows – “The quality of having experience, knowledge and good judgement ; the quality of being wise.” (Pearsall, Judi, 1998).

Thus dictionary definition helps us to understand that wisdom is somehow connected with three factors. The first is experience. The word 'experience' is a complicated word as it covers various types of experience like sense experience, mystical experience, observational knowledge of facts and events etc.

The second is knowledge. Knowledge maybe understood as a process in which the knowing mind comes into contact with some known object or data. The data are organized by the mind and connections are established. When we have knowledge then we connect thought with thought, idea with idea. Without establishing connection and integration knowledge cannot be produced. Bare facts amount to information but knowledge carries us beyond factual information.

The third factor indicated by the above definition of wisdom is judgement. More precisely wisdom involves sound judgement. Judgement refers to the ability to make considered decisions. Discerning is at the core of judgement. Without this ability to discern there cannot be any wisdom.

Wisdom in the Different Traditions

It is generally held that in western philosophical tradition the importance of wisdom was specially noted by Pythagoras. Pythagoras invented the term 'philosopher.' Much later the Roman philosopher Cicero stated that as the lover of wisdom the philosopher is devoted to “the contemplation and discovery of nature.” (Cicero, 1996, p.433). We are not sure but it is possible that Pythagoras believed that wisdom consists in understanding the basic laws governing nature. In this sense wisdom comes very close to the scientific enterprise. The scientific enterprise is concerned with discovering the basic laws of nature. It is in this sense philosophy operated as natural philosophy which was the originator of physics. But it is not nowadays generally maintained that scientific knowledge and wisdom are mutually interchangeable terms. Wisdom has a valuational concern and this valuational concern marks its difference from scientific knowledge.

Even though the idea of wisdom is etymologically bound up with philosophy it cannot be said that wisdom exclusively belongs to philosophy. Deep scientific knowledge often generates wisdom. The deep scientific knowledge about our environment and our psychology etc. have resulted in wisdom. It is in this sense scientific knowledge may serve as one of the sources of wisdom. Traditionally science is regarded to be value neutral. But modern environmental science refuses to be value neutral. The writings of the environmental scientists have generated wisdom regarding the direction of the course of human civilization and our destiny.

The long shadow of the concept of wisdom falls on the entire history of philosophy. The Delphic Oracle had declared Socrates to be the wisest of all (“The Delphic Oracle, who's often riddling responses to a wide range of religious, political, and moral questions were delivered in a state of ecstasy by Pythia, the priestess of Apollo.” *Oxford English Reference Dictionary.*). Socrates was fully aware of his limitations and so he thought upon the implications of this oracle. Socrates felt that he was called the wisest simply because he knew about his ignorance while others were not aware of their mental limitations. Thus, in the philosophy of Socrates wisdom gets connected with the limitations of one's knowledge or the awareness of one's ignorance. Perhaps at this point wisdom came to be connected with a fundamental virtue cultivated by many saints and that virtue is humility. Socrates was greatly influenced by the dictum 'know thy self.' While trying to meet the challenge of Sophistry Socrates combined wisdom with self examination. Socrates always looked for clarification and right definitions the employment of his peculiar conversational method. In this conversational method dialogue is employed for the discovery of truth. All these practices and ideas came to be connected with the concept of wisdom. Wisdom, in the philosophy of Socrates, got associated with the attempt to know oneself and also the attempt to acquire clarity. Thus for Socrates wisdom is associated with certain significant intellectual exercises.

In Plato's philosophy the ethical dimension of wisdom was explored. For Plato the well ordered soul is the supreme ethical ideal. He was the first philosopher who considered wisdom to be one of the four cardinal virtues. The four cardinal virtues are courage, moderation, justice and wisdom. Plato believed that by cultivating wisdom men can become God like and step out of the limitations of certain aspects of the human predicament. It may be noted here that in contemporary existentialism it is held that the human life because of the diverse contingencies that straddle it is absurd. This absurdity is regarded in existentialism to be a part of human predicament. But Plato held that wisdom gives us a way out of this limitation of human condition. This understanding of the Platonic conception led to the development of the spiritual conception of wisdom. Philosophers like St. Augustine were influenced by the Platonic understanding of wisdom. St. Augustine developed a spiritual understanding of the concept of wisdom. This is an important dimension of the idea of wisdom. The spiritual understanding of the concept of wisdom is present in the Divine Comedy of Dante. In the first canto of the Inferno, Dante presents the allegory of a hound representing noble spiritual values which will enable the hound to counter the representative of everything evil presented allegorically in the form of a she wolf. Dante stated that the hound who is the representative of good will "thrive in wisdom, virtue and pure love." (*Inferno* 1.104) (Translated by Robin Kirkpatrick).

A.N. Whitehead had stated that the entire history of European philosophy is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato. (Whitehead, Alfred North, 1929, p.53). The central importance of Plato in western philosophy implies that his conception of wisdom is also significant in western philosophical tradition. While Plato regarded wisdom to be a cardinal virtue Aristotle was more emphatic in asserting the link between wisdom and knowledge. Aristotle stated that "wisdom must be intuitive reasoning combined with scientific knowledge." (Curnow, Trevor, 2016, p.210).

But there is a long tradition of folk wisdom and in this tradition the cultivation of wisdom is not necessarily linked with the scientific enterprise. Folk wisdom gets expression through proverbs, maxims and fables. When the Indian sage Vishnu Sarma was requested by a king to instruct his stupid sons by their father who was also a king the result was the great book Panchatantra. The instruction mainly aimed at imparting wisdom. This wisdom served also as practical guide in everyday life. Here we find an example of fables and tales serving as the vehicle of wisdom. In pre literate societies proverbs and tales were frequently employed to convey wisdom and they served as repositories of wisdom.

But the bits of wisdom conveyed through proverbs in traditional societies are often isolated in nature. They do not make up a systematic body of knowledge. Umberto Eco in a highly influential essay (Eco, Umberto, 2012, pp.162-169) had demonstrated that proverbs are often in mutual conflict. Both science and philosophy are systematic bodies of knowledge. Popular wisdom does not amount to systematic bodies of knowledge. But still it is undeniable that the sages of the pre literate societies grappled with many fundamental problems of life and experience as they encountered and their endeavours resulted in the production of various proverbs and maxims. Tolstoy wrote, "Wisdom is the understanding of life's eternal truths." (Tolstoy, Leo, 1997). The eternal problems of life engaged the minds of the thinking people of various societies including the pre literate societies. When written literature appeared then a body of works collectively known as "the written literature" also appeared. Many books of the Bible such as Proverbs, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, The Book of Job etc. are regarded as wisdom literature. The Upanishads are also often regarded as wisdom literature.

In the Upanishads the conception of wisdom is elaborated by connecting it with the idea of the ultimate reality. Here wisdom is viewed as direct realization of the ultimate reality which in its cosmic aspect is called Brahman and in the subjective aspect is called the Atman. The great Upanishadic dictum, as found in the Chandogya Upanishad is "that thou art" (tat tva asi). It is regarded to be one of the four great sentences (mahavakya) of the Upanishads (Chandogya, Upanishad, Chapter 6). This statement is regarded in the Upanishadic philosophical tradition of India to be the epitome of the highest wisdom. Upanishads generally distinguished between two kinds of knowledge – lower knowledge

and higher knowledge. In the Upanishadic tradition wisdom is identified with higher knowledge. The higher knowledge is often regarded to be a stage of non dual bliss.

The Upanishadic conception of wisdom has clearly a mystical dimension. A mystical dimension of the idea of wisdom is cultivated in Sufism, which is the form of mysticism imbedded in Islam. The Sufis believed that they were "God's friends, perpetually engaged in remembrance of him." (Baldick, Julian, 1989, p.91). Here we find wisdom acquiring a clear spiritual dimension.

The above discussion shows that there are different aspects and dimensions of the idea of wisdom. The range of wisdom is quite broad as it extends from proverbs belonging to the folk tradition to the mystical engagements of the Upanishadic seers. It is not possible to find a single essence of wisdom. In other words an essentialist approach to wisdom is not acceptable. In fact we find a network of beliefs, ideas and practices associated with wisdom. We can borrow a term from Ludwig Wittgenstein and state that wisdom is a family – resemblance term. The various ideas and practices connected with wisdom crisscross and overlap. But there is no common essence. Every culture and every age has its share of wisdom. Social reformers are looked up to because people often believed that they have wisdom. The reverential attitude shown to the teachers of mankind is connected with the belief that they are repositories of wisdom. The right cultivation of wisdom of course does not preclude the critical attitude and this is a point which was specially emphasised by Socrates.

Wisdom and the Idea of Philosophy

The idea of wisdom is sometimes woven into the very definition of philosophy. It is a well known point that there is no unanimity among philosophers regarding the definition of philosophy. The neo scholastic philosopher Jacques Maritain has attempted to give a definition of a philosopher and not of philosophy. In this definition the idea of wisdom plays an important role. Maritain wrote, "A philosopher is a man in search of wisdom. Wisdom does not seem to be an exceedingly widespread commodity; there has never been overproduction in this field. The greater the scarcity of what the philosopher is supposed to be concerned with, the more we feel inclined to think that society needs the philosopher badly" (Maritain, Jacques, 1961, p.3).

Emphasizing the aspect of wisdom which is such an integral part of the definition of a philosopher and also by implication of philosophy Maritain stated that society cannot do without philosopher. The reason is that philosophers as thinking beings serve as mirrors. The wisdom that they serve as a beacon (this metaphor used by Maritain has different shades of meaning.). A philosopher helps the people to identify the errors and thereby urge them to struggle against them. A society, if it is not merely an animal society, is made up of individuals endowed with freedom and intelligence. Society needs the identification of errors and also the struggle against these errors and here the wisdom of philosophers can give guidance. The quest for wisdom and the quest for truth are closely related and in this quest philosophers often differ among themselves. Controversies are ever present in philosophy and the very presence of controversies signifies that the philosophical quest for truth and wisdom is a quest which is constantly being renewed. The wisdom that philosophers are looking for is of crucial importance and anything that is crucial is difficult. Jacques Maritain further wrote, "Plato told us that beautiful things are difficult, and that we should not avoid beautiful dangers. Mankind would be in jeopardy, and soon in despair, if it is shunned the beautiful dangers of intelligence and reason" (Maritain, Jacques, 1961, p.5). Wisdom is here ultimately grounded on intelligence and reason. It is something which might have, in the language of both Plato and Maritain, beautiful dangers. Many basic philosophical ideas incorporate wisdom. These ideas become important components of the corpus that we call philosophy and within philosophy they exercise a kind of power. This may be called power of wisdom. Different philosophers have different conceptualizations and hence their approaches to the basic wisdoms inherent in philosophy might differ. This is one of the factors leading to philosophical controversies.

The Aim of Wisdom

Negatively seeking wisdom does not aim at supply of information. Moreover wisdom does not directly aim at material progress. It seems that the link between material progress and wisdom is at most an external link. The last few hundred years has seen great material progress and this material progress is connected with harnessing the forces and resources generated by nature to serve some human end. But the great wisdom literature of the world is generally regarded to be of ancient origin. In fact central ideas of the wisdom literature of the ancient period have increasingly been employed in the modern period to understand the limitations of the human effort and the destiny of our civilization. A few examples might illustrate our point. In Christian theories we find the seven deadly sins. These are the basic human vices and they are pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth. Contemporary thinkers like Konrad Lorenz and Linus Pauling have written books about the great collective mistakes and harmful acts committed by the modern man. In their writings they have classed these gross human follies under the head of seven deadly sins. An ancient wisdom is here employed to understand the course of history in general and environmental history in particular in the modern period. Here we find one basic aim of wisdom – giving assistance to our understanding of our present human predicament.

Many of the problems of philosophy are perennial problems. Perennial philosophy (philosophia perennis) is an ancient concept of the intellectual tradition of mankind. If there is indeed a perennial philosophy then it is only to be expected that there is an age old operation of wisdom which gives sustenance to perennial philosophy. There has to be some ancient sources of wisdom that are operative in the human mind at various times and places giving nourishment to philosophical speculations in which the power of wisdom is very prominently present. The phrase ‘power of wisdom’ is consciously used by us. We thereby mean that in society where there may be mutually conflicting and mutually competing ideas, those ideas having the power of wisdom at their command may provide guidance to people. As light dispels darkness, in the same way in the long run ideas incorporating wisdom may dispel the gloom of ignorance.

Revelation of truth that may remain hidden is the function of wisdom. A mind endowed with wisdom can reveal the hidden truth. The idea of disclosure or revelation is employed by many philosophers including Heidegger. In his philosophy of art Heidegger discusses how an artist reveals something which is hidden in an object and thereby creates a work of art. Similarly some deep truth may remain hidden in some situation or situations and a keen mind through a deep power of observation and understanding may bring to focus it. This is essentially an act of wisdom. This revelatory function of wisdom has also an accompaniment and that accompaniment is providing guidance. Here lies the goal of wisdom. A life in which wisdom is operative is a better life because here we have a higher level of fulfilment and a greater amount of happiness.

Conclusion

We conclude that the idea of wisdom occupies a central position in philosophy as well as society. Because it is a scarce commodity therefore there is a great need for it. The concern of wisdom with the laws governing the universe indicates that it has a scientific dimension and this dimension was brought to focus by Pythagoras. Even though we are not sure what was the main philosophical focus of Pythagoras yet it is possible that in his philosophy wisdom was somehow connected with the scientific enterprise. Wisdom is also connected with virtue and as such it has a moral dimension. In the moral dimension wisdom is connected with the Socratic program of self knowledge. It may also be seen that wisdom has a spiritual dimension as well. In folk philosophy as represented by proverbs, myths and fables we find wisdom and here wisdom is primarily employed to provide guidance to our everyday life. We often find that wisdom has a goal and this goal is giving assistance to our understanding of the human predicament. Revelation of truth which may otherwise remain hidden is one of the functions of wisdom and in this respect wisdom is associated with perennial philosophy (philosophia perennis). We may even view, by following Wittgenstein, wisdom to be a family

resemblance term and see that the various ideas and practices connected with wisdom signify a network and not some hidden unified essence.

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