

# What is Wisdom?: A Philosophical and Metaphysical Examination

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the nature of wisdom from a cultural, anthropological, and metaphysical framework. The authors examine the possible criteria that are needed to sort wise choices, counsel, and goals from their unwise counterparts. We also examine if wisdom must be self-constructed or if it can be something given to us, given by our traditions and by our history.

(Keywords: nature of wisdom, intelligence, metaphysics, scriptural tradition, cultural constructs)

## INTRODUCTION

As a society, we are constantly experiencing a ceaseless flow of information, but as we are fed with more and more information, there is an implication that we should be able to sort the valuable from the garbage, but who do you trust to tell you which is which? Do you trust what the majority is saying? Should you be suspicious of the majority opinion specifically because it is the majority opinion? What is often missed is that discerning the nature of the information is not a matter of mere intelligence, but is within the domain of what has traditionally been called “wisdom”. Wisdom is the practice of discerning actions to choose the best possible available solution to problems that lacks a clear answer.

## WISDOM vs INTELLIGENCE

How does this differ from intelligence? Intelligence concerns problem solving or figuring out an optimal path given certain goals. But wisdom is often concerning subjects like “what is the goal in the first place”, to which intelligent problem solving cannot offer direct input.

Solving a problem implies knowing the desired final state, but what do you do when you don't

even know what the desired final state is? Or maybe you know some things that you should prioritize, such as making people happy, doing what is morally correct, and so on... but how do you know which specific goals apply to this particular instance, especially if they are in conflict with other goals? It is at this point that wisdom needs to be employed.

What possible criteria do we need to sort wise choices, counsel and goals from their unwise counterparts? This examination threatens to become circular—we need to be wise in order to even understand what wisdom is in the first place. We are left with a concept that may have no home. But this may only be a problem if we assume that we must wisely deduce what wisdom is from scratch — but why is that even necessary? Why can't wisdom be something given to us, given by our traditions and by our history?

It's with that note that it may be worth looking to the Christian scriptural tradition for insight. You could pick other traditions, and there's no need to deny the validity of doing so, but this is the tradition that has most deeply influenced western cultures today, so it's worth considering. In looking over the Biblical literature [1], perhaps the most striking statement about wisdom comes from the book of Proverbs, which is stated in a few different places: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10, ESV) [2].

Does this mean only theists can be wise? Atheists may be able to have a “fear of the Lord” in a qualified sense. Perhaps the fear of the Lord is just comprehending the Mysterious Other as God emptied of niceties and superficial religious pretensions. Words are double-edged; they can be offered with the intention of comforting platitudes about a God of love and acceptance and non-judgment, or words can point you to the terrifying reality of God's incomprehensibility and

overwhelming nature. A God not feared does not engender worship. What is the point of fearing something one could conceptually toss from palm to palm like a rubber ball?

## RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS OF WISDOM RELATED TO THE UNKNOWABLE NATURE OF GOD

Many religious leaders like to point out that the fear of the Lord is about awe and reverence, but why can't it be that AND a sense of uncomprehending terror? Now, this is not advocating fear in the sense of seeing God as a threat, but it is advocating seeing God as something that cannot be tamed and treated as a muzzled creature that would never dream to upset one's life. God is, by definition incomprehensible, and if you in any sense fear the unknown, that fear should peak in the thing in existence that most buckles comprehension, that is, what goes by the name of God.

I think one of the key implications of properly fearing God is that nothing else should seem all that terrifying by comparison. It is often fear itself that is the present danger for humans. In its extreme form, anxiety disorders can damage much of life, but even otherwise mentally healthy people can be driven by fears—fear of losing a relationship, fear of public embarrassment, fear of being known as one really is—and driven to perdition by acting irrationally to assuage those fears.

Much of the political climate is driven by fear, and I don't think you have to belong to any party to appreciate that we would likely be better off if we could face our fears with courage rather than simply react to them. The fear of God puts all these things into perspective and allows us to rest in the knowledge that it is possible that God will work good even out of the chaos we sow. Faith that somehow the arc of the world is leaning towards justice can still many small terrors.

Is there any sense in which a non-believer could have a fear of the Lord, and therefore gain wisdom? I think the question depends much on which of the elements united in God that the particular non-believer acknowledges.

- Is there such a thing as justice?

- Is love a real force, and does it have a place of primacy?
- Is morality more than just a collective illusion?

I think these things are best united in a person, namely the person of God, but the degree to which one can reconstruct the metaphysical elements of God as being real forces in this universe allows for a carrying of the fear and reverence of the things associated with God. But it may also just be admitting that you do not know what you do not know; for an atheist, this may be “fear and trembling” of that which is beyond human comprehension [3].

## CONCLUSIONS

What might we learn about wisdom from the context of Biblical literature? Wisdom, at least from Proverbs, is associated with words like “understanding”, “righteousness”, “insight”, “justice”, “knowledge” and “prudence”. They seem to all be gesturing in the same direction; it seems to involve gaining important and relevant *knowledge* about what is true and real and valuable, we are formed by our preoccupation with God in a *moral* formation based on love, and learn to think *shrewdly* from the examples of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the tradition. To be wise is a combination of relevant knowledge, moral blamelessness and shrewd thinking. To split it up further is to discuss things that do not, in of themselves, constitute wisdom.

Of course, none of this addresses *how* to be wise. However, it allows us to consider when something is categorical not wisdom. If we lack information about that which we would make a judgment about, we cannot be wise. If we are not considering our options through what is at least morally permissible, then we may be shrewdly effective in pursuing our ends but the ends themselves are corrupt. Finally, if we cannot be effective, if we cannot apply a kind of problem solving to the problem, then we still lack wisdom. If we are wise, we must have all three elements.

Can something be unwise even if all three elements are present? Well, you may make a mistake on all three fronts. You could think you have adequate information but be misinformed, you could think that something is morally permissible when it is in fact not so, and you may

think that your actions are shrewd when they are in fact ineffective.

There are many other questions to consider in an examination of the nature of wisdom, what it is and how it is attained, but to begin with basic questions about its nature, and to think carefully through it is a good way to begin. Wisdom is so naturally a part of human experience that it is a practice that we all experience, regardless of whether we refer to it by that name.

## REFERENCES

1. English Standard Version Bible. 2001. ESV Online. <https://esv.literalword.com/>
2. Proverbs 9:10, ESV
3. Philippians 2:12-13, ESV

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