

## PRACTICAL WISDOM IN EVERY DAY LIFE

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**Abstract:** *Article presents the discussion about topical problems of wisdom. The methodological orientation deals with a role of wise people, the task of proverbs and maxims, wisdom as a masterful solution to a difficult life problems. Special effort is oriented to a definition and additional properties of wisdom. The relations between everyday adult life and practical wisdom are discussed.*

**Key words:** *wisdom, practical wisdom, personality, adulthood, psychology, proverbs, life problems*

When asked to think about wisdom, most people quite readily provide concrete instances of it. Their responses usually fall into three categories: (1) mentions of specific public or historical figures who exemplify wisdom, (2) proverbs or maxims about wisdom, and (3) descriptions of solutions to particular life problems that because of their challenging complexity and uncertainty are assumed to require wisdom.

### Wise People

Who are the „wise“ people whose names are adduced under the first heading as public prototypes of wisdom? Who is mentioned, of course, depends on the respondent’s cultural, ethnic, professional, or religious background, and when the question is asked in a small social gathering, a lively discussion about the relative merits of the proposed wise personages often ensues. Why is there usually a lack of robust consensus about such nominations? Perhaps for two reasons. First, as the discussion about the particular nominee proceeds, more and more evidence is generated about vices and weaknesses, calling into question whether the person was „truly“ wise (e.g., Confucius’s occasional harshness in personal dealings with others, or King Solomon’s somewhat ruthless methods of gaining and maintaining political power). And second, our conception of wisdom seems to include the notion of such a high and „pure“ form of an ideal that no flesh-and-blood person lives up to the standards implied; wisdom in its pure form may exist only in our minds. The idea of wisdom as an abstraction is also implied in some historical writings. Confucius, for example, when asked to nominate „true men“ (interpreted to be similar to our conception of „wise people“), systematically refused to identify specific individuals. The sociologist Weber’s notion of an „ideal“ type carries

similar connotations. For Weber, an ideal type is part of a speculative theory, but not necessarily present in phenotypic reality.

## Proverbs and Maxims

The second instantiation of wisdom in everyday conversations deals with proverbs and maxims, or related things such as aphorisms. Proverbs differ from maxims. While some proverbs imply instruction for reflexive thinking leading to action, maxims typically offer direct instruction for what should be done; that is, they suggest how to act by „practical“ wisdom in specific instances of everyday life. Two well-known wisdom-type maxims known to most of us are „Sleep on it before you act“ and „Try again, your luck may change“.

The significance of proverbs and maxims for understanding complex and deeply rooted cultural phenomena, such as gender, beauty, or excellence, has long been appreciated. As Francis Bacon put it: „The genius, wit, and spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs.“ Taylor (1931), introducing the study of proverbs and illustrating the argument that proverbs are „one man’s wit and all men’s wisdom.“ Another short sentence capturing the meaning of such proverbs is the definition of a proverb as wisdom expressed in a sentence (Mieder, 1993). However, these works also include critical evaluations, for instance, the argument that proverbs and maxims are uncertain or even false regarding their empirical validity. Is it empirically true, for example, that „a tale never loses in the telling“, or that „familiarity breeds contempt“?

It is important to note at the outset that none of these maxims (or proverbs for that matter) in themselves are wisdom. First, the content of proverbs rarely fits empirical evidence. Second, and more importantly, as individual items these maxims typically highlight one or another of the various facets that make for wisdom. Wisdom, however, as we will see later, is inherently dynamic, uncertain and often suggests oppositional tendencies. Not surprisingly, therefore, the pool of individual maxims offers examples that contradict each other. For instance, the proverb „Clothes make the man“ can readily be contradicted by „Don’t judge a book by its cover“ These problems of meaning and empirical validity aside, proverbs can have „rich explanatory power“. The essence of proverbs and maxims, for instance, is that they are short and contain a highly condensed kernel of common-sense „truth.“ They are akin to punch lines with a high degree of common-sense understanding. Another feature of good proverbs is that they are contextually and temporally flexible; they are transported easily, from subject matter to subject matter, from language to language, and from historical period to historical period. For a proverb to be powerful, it must prove a certain historical and contextual generality in meaning and usage, although the specific text and content may vary. Kunstmann (1939) illustrates this point nicely when he shows how one proverb, first recorded about A.D. 1000, „It’s an ill bird that fouls its own nest“, found its way through practically all major Western languages; it was present in early Graeco-Roman as well as Egyptian-Semitic lore. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the meaning carried in proverbs is associated with deep levels of knowledge and a special way of accessing and organizing that knowledge toward application to a given situation.

Considering the heuristic power of proverbs and maxims, it is not surprising, therefore, that proverbs and especially maxims are considered the earliest heralds of the so-called „wisdom literature.“ Law (1995), for instance, provides an erudite exposition showing how the wisdom literature entered even into book-length treatments of Latin grammar during the 7th century, a topic of learning that would otherwise strike one as dry. In this instance, a 7th-century author, the monk Virgilius, exploited the early wisdom literature to such a degree that Law (1995) argues that his interest in that topic was at least as deep as in the seemingly primary topic of the book, that is, grammar.

Historically, the Seven Sages of Greece, all of whom were philosophers who lived during the 6th century B.C., are another important source of ancient wisdom-type sayings and maxims. „Most men are bad“, proffered Bias of Priene; „Consider the end“ is credited to Chilo of Sparta; „Avoid extremes“ and look for „the golden mean“ are prescripts by Cleobulus of Lindos. One of Periander of Corinth’s statements is „Nothing is impossible to industry“ and there is perhaps the best known wisdom-related maxim of Solon of Athens: „Know thyself.“

The use of wisdom-related proverbs continues into the present, including market activities and advisory statements. Wisdom sayings are, for example: „The current generation builds the road on which the next one travels“. Other instant proverbs are the following: „Everything has two sides“, „Time is the best healer“ and so on.

While the core meaning of proverbs and maxims evinces much transcultural and ~ transhistorical similarity, the specifics and applications do vary. More recently (Peng and Nisbet, 1999), there is also work to show cultural differences in the preference of proverbs. Chinese, for instance, prefer proverbs that highlight the oppositional, whereas Americans lean more towards proverbs that are directional in the sense of maxims.

## **Wisdom as a Masterful Solution to a Difficult Life Problem**

A further and more concrete step in the direction of identifying wisdom in everyday life is the articulation of a life problem and its solution. This instantiation follows from the idea that wisdom-related meaning is inherently tied to difficult matters of life and creative problem-solving behavior.

As an example of this way to refer to wisdom; most of us are familiar with King Solomon’s biblical solution to a dispute between two women who both claimed to be the natural mother of a child. Solomon’s suggestion to divide the child by sword and give literally one half to each woman (and one woman’s immediate renunciation of her claim in light of this decision) meets little disagreement. It seems to most of us an effective strategy for solving a difficult problem. Solomon did not know who the biological mother was, but he was able to find a strategy for discovering the truth using the notion of true motherhood as sacrifice.

This example of wisdom highlights the idea that wisdom deals with difficult problems of the human condition and that it involves a creative way of solving the problem. The Solomon example also makes evident that wisdom is supposed to deal with finding

a solution that is in the interest of a „good“ life. It was the biological mother for whose welfare a solution needed to be fitted. This commitment of wisdom to the good and the morally legitimated well-being of oneself and others is a critical part of our everyday conceptions of wisdom. If the skills of knowledge were invested to exploit others or to advance one's own cause at the expense of others, we would not invoke wisdom.

## Defining Wisdom

We agree with some literary sources (for example Baltes, 2005) that seven properties are generally accepted as inherent in any definition of wisdom.

- 1) Wisdom addresses important and difficult questions and strategies about the conduct and meaning of life.
- 2) Wisdom includes knowledge about the limits of knowledge and the uncertainties of the world.
- 3) Wisdom represents a truly superior level of knowledge, judgment, and advice.
- 4) Wisdom constitutes knowledge with extraordinary scope, depth, and balance.
- 5) Wisdom involves a perfect synergy of mind and character, that is, an orchestration of knowledge and virtues.
- 6) Wisdom represents knowledge used for the good or well-being of oneself and that of others.
- 7) Wisdom, though difficult to achieve and to specify, is easily recognized when manifested.

What is the meaning of these properties of wisdom? The first feature, that wisdom addresses important and difficult questions and strategies about the conduct of life and the human condition sets wisdom apart from other forms of everyday knowledge. Wisdom encompasses but goes beyond common-sense and practical knowledge about how people are expected to function in typical situations and how the physical and social world operates. Such knowledge is part of wisdom. But, wisdom deals predominantly with matters of much significance to the human condition, such as the conduct and meaning of life. Thus, wisdom includes knowledge about existential problems that are at the frontiers of what we are able to understand and master. Building on a concept advanced by Karl Jaspers, several scholars have used the notion of Grenzsituationen.

The second feature, that wisdom includes knowledge about the limits of knowledge and the uncertainties of the world, makes clear that wisdom is not identical to scientific and technological knowledge. Wisdom-related knowledge involves insights into the limitations of science, for instance regarding aspects of spirituality and meaning of life. Moreover, wisdom speaks to the frontiers of our insights into the human condition, the unknown and uncertain. In this vein, many writers on wisdom (e.g., Meacham, 1983) have argued that the essence of wisdom is knowledge about the limits of what can be known. Yet, despite the limits and uncertainties, we expect wisdom to guide us in a useful direction. Included in this guidance is wisdom's ability to protect us from the seductiveness of quick answers and ready-made solutions.

The third feature, that wisdom is a truly superior level of knowledge, judgment, and advice, indicates that wisdom is the best that our minds can achieve, and, therefore, often regarded as utopian or divine. Wisdom is akin to an ideal that perhaps we can only strive for, approximate, rather than attain. In any case, the level of excellence attributed to wisdom makes it special, something that is likely to be fully achieved only by very few, if by anyone.

The fourth feature, that wisdom is knowledge with extraordinary scope, depth, and balance, emphasizes that wisdom is integrative, that it focuses on the whole and the weighting and moderation of its parts, that it is more than specialized knowledge in the narrow sense. Aristotle's ancient saying, „the wise organizes“ (sapiens est ordinare), is transported into modern views on the holistic and integrative structure and function of wisdom (Oelmiiller, 1989). Contextual and holistic integration and balance are achieved, however, without losing the specifics of the instance. When wisdom is called upon in a specific situation, it places the specific instance into the perspective of a larger whole and balances the arguments. This particular feature of wisdom is often also identified as knowledge from a distance, as knowledge that moderates or modulates present reality in relation to the past and the future, as knowledge that moves beyond the emotional and intellectual forces (Hartshorne, 1987).

The fifth feature, that wisdom represents a perfect synergy between mind and character, a perfect orchestration of knowledge and virtues, reflects the view that wisdom is more than „cognitive“ knowledge. For wisdom to emerge, cognitive, social, and motivational attributes need to converge and form a whole of extraordinary excellence. This view of wisdom as the highest form of integration of mind and soul dates back to the religious origins of the wisdom concept. Thus the strength of the connection between mind and behavior is much influenced by the impact of religion on the definition of wisdom (Waldenfels, 1989). In Western Europe, on the other hand, the historical struggle for separation of philosophy (science) and religion has spawned conceptions of wisdom that include the kind where wisdom is reserved for the theoretical aspects of the mind rather than wisdom as an integrated whole of mind and behavior.

The sixth feature, that wisdom is knowledge developed and used for the well-being of oneself and others, like the fourth feature, points to the intimate connection between the mind of wisdom and the motivational goal of wisdom. Wisdom is not knowledge used for the benefit of a single person alone. Rather, it indicates of a high level of functioning in the interest of one's own development and that of others. Wisdom, then, considers not only the personal, but also the collective good. This feature highlights what is often called the moral dimension of wisdom (Kekes, 1995). To put it simply, and with due attention to historical evolution, we consider wisdom a property of God and not the devil, an attribute of kings interested in the best for their people and not of dictators interested in Machiavellian strategies of human exploitation, a property of a well-meaning counselor giving good advice to someone in a difficult situation and not of someone whose advice serves his or her own needs more than those of the advisee. In short, knowledge in the hand of „evil“ or „ego“ minded people, despite their expert

understanding of how and why humans function, is not considered wisdom. For wisdom as a body of knowledge to be realized, it needs to be in the hands of a well-meaning and not a crooked or ill-tempered person.

The seventh feature, that wisdom is difficult to achieve but more easily recognized when it is manifested, means that wisdom, despite its extraordinary level of excellence, is part of our everyday lives and our personal experiences. It means that wisdom is not completely outside our lives and our minds; it rests firmly in the core of our cultural mentalities and selves. As we know from psychological research on learning and memory, it is easier to recognize than to recall a given memory event. The same is true for wisdom. Although we may not be able to produce wisdom ourselves, our minds are prepared to look for it and to recognize its products. Therefore, despite its rarity and profundity, wisdom is not completely hidden, or something that can be „contacted“ only by an elite few. On the contrary, we all are somewhat connected to wisdom; we recognize, though in varying degrees, its challenge and see its footprints. Wisdom, therefore, is a phenomenon of public and social construction and discourse.

## **Additional Properties of Wisdom**

Beyond these seemingly agreed upon universal views on wisdom, other properties could be considered. For instance, there is the question of types of wisdom. Because wisdom is so complex and multifaceted, it is argued that not all aspects of wisdom cannot be located in any single person, that there is a need for specialization with different people holding the key to different aspects of wisdom. Imagine the requirements one would need to display the full range of theoretical and practical skills involved in the conduct of life or the full spectrum of relevant emotions, including melancholy and optimism. Assmann (1991), on the basis of her historical analyses, distinguishes, for instance, between parental-authoritative wisdom, judicial or kingly wisdom, magical wisdom, and skeptical wisdom. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament, with its distinct books of wisdom, represents another example of types of wisdom, a collection of distinct ways to think feel „wisely“ about important matters of life.

Another feature of wisdom that could be considered for inclusion in the category of universals is that wisdom has a strong foundation in the social and the collective, that wisdom is collective knowledge. Thus one could make the point that wisdom is the hallmark of cultural evolution. Wisdom is collective knowledge about the conduct and meaning of life; and as a body of collective knowledge it includes multiple facets and styles of knowing and acting. Yet to include this view of wisdom in the category of universals would violate another part of the wisdom literature namely the strong emphasis placed on the existence of so-called sages or wise persons such as Solomon.

Other candidates for a universal characterization of wisdom are certain personality attributes and ways to think. Some argue, for example, that reflectivity and skepticism are essential to wisdom. In another context, Baltes (2005) invoked the concept of „constructive melancholy“. In a similar vein, it is said that wisdom is meant to overcome

extremes and to represent modulation at its best and this would include an extreme regarding reflectivity itself. Another candidate for a general wisdom conception may be the requirement that metaphysical topics, such as the question of the existence of god, are the essence of wisdom. Some scholars want to reserve the term wisdom for the metaphysical „philosophical“ aspects of life rather than the everyday „practical“ ones. Historically, this is similar to the distinction between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom.

As we mentioned earlier, we may also debate whether our everyday and scholarly conceptions of wisdom need to include further specifications of the intersection between knowledge and behavior. Must the wise, for instance, merely demonstrate superior knowledge, or must they also be seen to apply it in giving advice, and especially in the conduct of their own lives? In historical discussions of wisdom, this distinction between wisdom as knowledge and wisdom as a facet of personality is sometimes manifest in a relative emphasis on contemplative forms of wisdom as opposed to active ones. And certainly, there are historical variations of wisdom and cultural regions in the world in which wisdom-related knowledge and behavior form an integrated fabric.

## **Practical Wisdom in Everyday Life: More Than a Narrow Professional Expertise**

May be that some readers may evaluate the conception of wisdom described here too restrictive and elitist; is it, for instance, a reflection of an upper-class establishment-type mentality. Note that wisdom is restricted not only to a very high level of performance (excellence) but also to situations dealing with important matters of the human condition such as the meaning and right conduct of life.

Surely, wisdom in everyday life is construed in a broader and looser way than our first definitional frame of wisdom. In everyday language, wisdom also denotes more specialized expertise: the wisdom of the scientist, the financial expert, the football coach, the teacher, and the politician. Sure, the „wise“ teacher or „wise“ scientist may be very far from real wisdom. Indeed, we hear about the wise and about wisdom in most walks of life, and in each case our judgment reflects a positive evaluation, in the sense of a special expertise, the kind of expertise that in a given domain reflects the distillation of a lifetime of experience.

For the wise teacher or scientist (or any other professional specialization) to be truly lifted on the shield of wisdom, they need to demonstrate their special talents and skills in a wider context than their „narrow“ professional expertise. Otherwise, and because of their closer ties to the conduct and meaning of individual lives, the „wise“ grandmother may be closer to wisdom than the wise scientist. Expertise in a professional trade in itself is not enough.

For some experts to be at the core of wisdom, they need to demonstrate their

special skills and knowledge in a context that is close to important and difficult matters of the human condition. In other words, true wisdom enters the picture when a specific form of professional expertise is combined with global knowledge linking that field of specialization to larger questions of the human condition. The borderlines between expertise and wisdom are not precise.

## **Everyday Adult Life and Wisdom**

As we know, adulthood brings with it a new set of life problems, the kind of problems vis a vis which the need for wisdom or wise counsel often arises. It certainly is true that earlier phases of life require wise counsel too, but during adulthood the intensity and frequency seems amplified. As we move through adulthood, we seem to feel that wisdom is of particular importance when we reflect on the meaning of life, deal with the dynamics and conflicts associated with parenting and mentoring, begin to experience our own biological finitude, evaluate issues of generational constancy and change, or anticipate our own approach to „successful aging“ despite increasing biological vulnerability. We can conclude that these are the kinds of questions that call for a high level of knowledge about the human condition, that is, wisdom.

During midlife, then, the fabric of our day-to-day experiences takes on some new qualities and complexities. We can speak about a number of topics or challenges that make the second half of life conducive to the search for wisdom:

1. The legacy of adulthood and living long
2. The multi-generational dynamics
3. The shift from distance-from-birth to distance-from-death
4. The accumulation of unfinished business
5. Unexpected life circumstances and social change
6. Balancing the gains and losses of life
7. The search for the meaning of life.

The legacy of adulthood and living long refers to the increase in the complexity of one's world in adulthood, the concentration of responsibilities during that phase of life, but also the quantity of our life history and its psychological consequences. As our life biographies unfold, we have more and more to store in our memory, more to consider, coordinate, and evaluate. Adult roles in family and professional life can be terribly rich in challenges and responsibilities. Growing older also leads to a longer and swelling past; we leave longer and more complex tracks. The same applies to the planning of the future. As we think about the future including its shrinking horizons, the shadows of the past become longer and longer.

The multi-generational dynamic involves families, social networks, and historical embeddedness: Sometime during adulthood, we are confronted with an extended vision of our generational responsibility and social embeddedness. For instance, our roles as parents can be extended from concern for our children to include care for our

aging parents and also for others in the world of work for whom we serve as mentors. This extended vision amplifies understanding of the complexities and variations of the social networks in which we live.

Furthermore, sometime during midlife, we shift our predominant perspective from our distance from birth to our distance from death. Up to adulthood, our primary way to mark time is to count distance from birth (chronological age); we worry less about how much time we have left. As we approach old age, distance from death emerges as a stronger component of our time perspective. As we deal with this change in our conception of „lifetime“, as we count the years to live more than the years lived, the pressure to set priorities and to re-evaluate the meaning of our lives increases.

The accumulation of unfinished business is another consequence of living longer. The past is not finished, the slate is not always clean, as we move on to the next phase of life. Often our earlier life tasks, such as parenting and education, are not completed „on time“. They go on and on and seem endless. When we add on the new age-appropriate tasks and roles that are unique to growing older, we face demands beyond what we anticipated. And there are life stories and life plans that we were not able to implement. As we grow older, the incomplete parts of one’s life suggest new forms of reconstruction and mastery.

Unexpected life circumstances and social change refer to our experiences of events that are not part of our expected pattern for our lives. Some of these events are rare, idiosyncratic ones such as winning a lottery. In fact, based on personal accounts, it is occasionally said that unexpected events such as an accident or a divorce seem to become more the rule than the exception. More and more events also remind us of the physical realities and shortcomings of our bodies. We or close friends seem increasingly to confront biological limitations and illness. Thus the further we live into adulthood, the more people of our own generation we see become sick or even die. Such unexpected or non-normative events involve particularly difficult constellations of coping and mastery.

In addition to such age-graded unexpected events, social changes make us confront the unexpected and deal with it. Historical shifts in technology, for instance, carry implications for the intellectual standing and competitiveness of adults in general, but also for one’s own sense of efficacy. Values and cultural norms, such as attitudes toward sexual orientation, marriage, work, and leisure evolve. Often these changes are initiated primarily by the younger age groups, who see them not as changes at all, but as the norm for their generation. For older adults, on the other hand, the social changes represent departures from the past, some of which involve true confrontations challenging our ways of managing our lives.

Living long and growing older also result in a deeper experience with and understanding of the dynamic between gains and losses in life. Much of what happens in childhood and adolescence is governed by a belief in growth and progress. The gains, anticipated or realized, are in the foreground. As life extends into adulthood, the focus

shifts. We concern ourselves more and more with maintenance of functioning and avoidance of losses. The *savoir vivre* of old age, in particular, requires a new quality of reflectivity, a quality that reflects a growing understanding of the role of suffering, including its potential positive outcomes such as acceptance of one's finitude and tranquility.

The search for the meaning of life is perhaps the most explicit manifestation of our continuous struggle in adulthood for purpose and goal-directedness. Meaning of life speaks to the „holistic“ essence of our lives. As we face demanding life situations of high complexity, as the balance of gains and losses shifts, as we see our futures running out, we focus more and more on taking stock, on developing a balance sheet about our past, current, and future life. We reflect on our values and the purpose of our lives, we make efforts to have our minds outwit the limitations of our aging bodies.

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## PRAKTICKÁ MÚDROŠŤ V KAŽDODENNOM ŽIVOTE

**Abstrakt:** Článok uvádza diskusiu o aktuálnych problémoch múdrosti. Uvádzajú sa metodologické problémy stanovovania múdrych ľudí, pôsobenie príslovia a maxim ako

aj majstrovské riešenie ťažkých životných problémov. Diskutuje sa o vzťahoch medzi každodenným životom dospelých ľudí a praktickou múdrosťou.

**Kľúčové slová:** múdrosť, praktická múdrosť, osobnosť, dospelosť, psychológia, príslovia